'There is Confusion.'

The Politics of Silence, Fear and Hope in Catholic and Protestant Northern Uganda

Henni Alava
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PHD DISSERTATION

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‘THERE IS CONFUSION.’
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References
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***

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***
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## Acronyms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CC</td>
<td>Concerned Christians. Group formed by Protestants critical of the leadership of the Church of Uganda’s Kitgum Diocese.</td>
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<tr>
<td>CoU</td>
<td>Church of Uganda. Member of the global Anglican Communion, referred to in this thesis as the Protestant Church.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DP</td>
<td>Democratic Party. Currently a small opposition party that has close historical ties with the Catholic Church in Uganda.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FDC</td>
<td>Forum for Democratic Change. Leading opposition party in contemporary Uganda.</td>
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<tr>
<td>HSMF</td>
<td>Holy Spirit Mobile Forces. Rebel movement led by Alice (Auma) Lakwena.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LC1</td>
<td>Local Council / Local Councillor. Lowest level of the council system established by the NRM throughout Uganda.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LC5</td>
<td>Local Council 5. Highest level of the LC system in Uganda, referring to the district council. In common parlance, ‘LC5’ refers to the council’s chairperson.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LRM/A</td>
<td>Lord’s Resistance Movement / Army. Rebel movement led by Joseph Kony.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NRA</td>
<td>National Resistance Army. The rebel group headed by Yoweri Museveni which, after 1986, became the national army. Political arm referred to as the NRM; military arm renamed the UPDF in 1995.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NRM</td>
<td>National Resistance Movement. The political arm of the NRA, party of the incumbent president, Yoweri Museveni.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UPC</td>
<td>Uganda People’s Congress. Currently a small opposition party with close historical ties to the Church of Uganda. Party of the former president, Milton Obote.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UPDF</td>
<td>Uganda People’s Defence Forces. Uganda’s national army, see NRA.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RDC</td>
<td>Resident District Commissioner. Appointed by the president as his representative at the district level.</td>
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# Glossary

<p>| Acholi | The people of, and the language primarily spoken in, Acholiland, an area comprising (as of 2017) Gulu, Nwoya, Amuru, Kitgum, Pader, and Agago districts. Also used alongside the terms ‘northern Uganda’ and ‘Acholiland’ to refer to this region. |
| anyobanyoba | ‘Confusion’, literally stirring or mixing. |
| adungu | String instrument, originally from the DRC, widely used to accompany hymns at Protestant churches in Acholi. |
| bwola | Royal dance, commonly performed at public events, including Catholic celebrations. |
| Catholic | Concept used in this study, as in Uganda, to refer to the Roman Catholic Church in Uganda, and to its members. |
| cen | The vengeful spirit of the victim of a violent death. |
| cung iwibye | Literally ‘to stand on an anthill’, translates and refers to politics, particularly the combative and boastful politics related to campaigning. |
| eklisia | Catholic church building. |
| kanica | Protestant church building. |
| ladit (pl. ludiro) | Respectful title for an elderly man. |
| lakite | ‘Somehow’. |
| Lubanga | ‘God’ in the Acholi Protestant Bible. |
| mego | Literally ‘mother’, respectful title for an elderly woman. |
| Mican | The area surrounding the old mission station and current headquarters of the Diocese of Kitgum of the Church of Uganda. |
| Mission | When capitalised, refers to the Catholic parish of St Mary of Immaculate Conception, and to the neighbourhood around the Catholic mission station just outside of Kitgum Town. |
| meno | ‘White’, foreigner. |
| Protestant | Concept used in this study, as in Uganda, to refer to the (Anglican) Church of Uganda and its members. |
| Rubanga | ‘God’ in the Acholi Catholic Bible. |</p>
<table>
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<th>Term</th>
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<tr>
<td>Ṯwot (pl. Ṯwodi)</td>
<td>Chief.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ṯwot kalam</td>
<td>‘Chief of the pen’, chief appointed by colonial government.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ṯwot moo</td>
<td>Anointed chief.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Town Parish</td>
<td>A parish of the Church of Uganda in the centre of Kitgum Town, officially known as the Parish of Saint Janani Luwum.</td>
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Chapter 1

Introduction

In life it is so that some people want to create conflict and violence. Some people want everyone to just live in peace. Some people want to create chaos. And it is up to us to decide which path we want to follow.

(Orom, young Catholic man, Kitgum town, February 2015)

[Political narratives engage the imagination, not only in constructing stories about the past and the present, but in helping to articulate a vision of an alternative world.

(Andrews 2014, 86–87)

This study is about how community is imagined in the aftermath of war in northern Uganda. More specifically, it explores the ways in which the Catholic and the Protestant Church, as institutions and as the region’s largest religious communities, have influenced political imaginaries in the shadows of past violence and on-going societal tension. As its analytical thread, the study follows the Acholi concept of *anyobanyoba*, ‘confusion’, which relates to both an internally experienced sense of ambivalence and uncertainty, and an observed state of somehow mixed up affairs within a community. Rather than a static sense or state, *anyobanyoba* emerges as a dynamic and evolving aspect of life in post-war Acholi: one tinged by silence relating both to the past and present, and by an oscillation between fear and hope.

In order to understand the historical and contemporary societal role of mainline churches in Acholiland, the study analyses how silence, fear, and hope are created, entrenched, distributed, and challenged in the context of mainline Christianity in the region. A focus on silence and fear directs analysis towards the past, while that on imagination and hope orients it towards the future, reflecting the way in which political imaginaries are also crafted in everyday lives: between memories of times gone, and dreams of times to be, there lies the present, in which the choice outlined

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1 Following the practice common in Uganda, ‘Protestant’ in this study refers specifically to the Church of Uganda (CoU) and its members. The CoU is a member of the global Anglican Communion, which is headed by the Archbishop of Canterbury in the Church of England. When speaking of the CoU’s international partners, or of its doctrine, I thus use the term Anglican, rather than Protestant. Similarly, following Ugandan practice, I refer to the Roman Catholic Church in Uganda simply as the Catholic Church. When speaking of both the studied churches together, I use the term ‘mainline churches’, which in studies on African Christianity are also commonly referred to as missionary-established or historical churches, as distinguished from African-Initiated, or more recently established Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches (see Meyer 2004). In the 2014 Census, 32 per cent of the whole country’s population identified themselves as Anglican; 39 per cent as Catholic, and 11,1 as Pentecostal/Born Again/Evangelical (UBOS 2016, 73). As detailed in Chapter Three, in the Acholi region, the Catholic Church is even more dominant than in the country as a whole.
by Orom in the epigraph – whether to follow what appears to be the path of peace or that of chaos – must be made again and again.

The study draws on altogether nine months of ethnographic fieldwork (September 2012 – April 2013; February 2015 and February 2016) focusing on the Catholic Mission and the Protestant Town Parish in Kitgum town. Its main argument is that mainline churches, as cosmologically, socially, materially, and politically embedded institutions and communities, have acted as arenas, and provided their members resources, for narrative imagination, thereby influencing the reimagining of community in the aftermath of war. The following chapters unpack this argument through detailed analysis of historical and ethnographic material, and in discussion with a range of theoretical debates in anthropology, political theology, narrative studies and multidisciplinary scholarship on Christianity and politics in Africa. In the remainder of this Introduction, I provide an overview of the context of this study and describe the fieldwork and data from which it draws.

Northern Uganda: a brief introduction

Convention seems to demand that a study on a post-war society begin with the war, outlining where it was fought and by whom, how it started, how many died in it, and how it ended. So is the case with most studies on northern Uganda, which tend to take their cue from 1986, the year the currently incumbent president, Yoweri Museveni, grabbed power in Uganda, provoking resistance in northern parts of the country. For reasons that become clear in Chapters Two, Three, and Four, I am hesitant to comply with this custom. Compelled by the reader’s need for a sense of context, however, I present an overview of the northern Ugandan war in the following paragraphs but, as I hope the rest of this study will show, it cannot but be a grossly simplified narrative of processes that appeared far less linear and clear-cut to those who lived through them.

For twenty years after Museveni’s National Resistance Army (NRA) came to power in Uganda, waves of violent conflict between President Museveni’s government and those opposing him wreaked destruction in northern Uganda. Most of the violence centred in the region known as Acholiland, spreading at various points to

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2 This overview draws from a rich body of literature on northern Uganda. The most important accounts of the history of the war can be found in Atkinson (2010), Behrend (1999), Branch (2003, 2011), Finnström (2008) and Otunnu (2002). Other central sources include the collection of articles edited by Allen and Vlassenroot (2010), and the invaluable insider perspective to life with the LRM/A provided by Evelyn Amony (2015) and Ledio Cakaj (2016).

3 Northern Uganda or Acholiland is formally known as the Acholi sub-region, an area inhabited primarily by speakers of the Acholi language, whom I refer to as the Acholi. Their language is also commonly called Luo, a broader group of languages which includes the closely related Langi. According to the latest census, there are 1.47 million ethnic Acholi in Uganda, amounting to 4.4 percent of the total population (UBOS 2016). At times, for brevity and following common practice in the region, ‘Acholi’ is also used instead of Acholiland or northern Uganda to denote the region.
neighbouring regions, and eventually to neighbouring countries. The rebel group that outlasted the others came to be known as the Lord’s Resistance Movement / Army (hereafter referred to as the rebels or the LRM/A), and its leader, Joseph Kony, as a powerful man. Initially large numbers of Acholi citizens and clan elders supported the rebels, since they were seen to be fighting a legitimate battle against a violent usurper intent on destroying the Acholi, who till that point had held notable positions in the Ugandan military. Over the years, as the rebels’ violence increasingly targeted Acholi citizens, whom the LRA claimed to be disloyal, rather than the government, and as they began to abduct increasing numbers of children into their ranks, popular support for them in the region drastically lessened. But the government also failed to attract the local community’s favour. Up to two million people in northern Uganda were forcibly displaced into settlements the government called protected villages and Acholi opposition politicians labelled concentration camps. Driven into the camps both by fear of rebel violence and pressure from the government’s violent anti-insurgency campaigns, civilians were essentially stuck between the battle lines, subjected to the suffering and deaths caused by the poor nutrition, sanitation, and health conditions in the congested camps. In response, humanitarian actors provided the camps with emergency relief, which alleviated civilian suffering but simultaneously enabled the government’s violent policy of forced displacement to continue. (Branch 2011; Dolan 2009; Finnström 2008).

In the early 2000s, after years of neglect for what was going on in Acholiland, and praise for Uganda’s compliance with the donors’ development agenda, the international community’s gaze began to turn to the horrors of the war in the country’s north. Media stories and awareness-raising campaigns by non-governmental organisations drew particular attention to the plight of the children abducted into the rebel ranks, and those seeking shelter from abduction who walked long distances to sleep in the comparative safety of towns. By emphasising specific aspects and downplaying others, the war came to be portrayed as a prime example of the millenarian irrationality and savagery of African conflicts and – especially in the much later campaigns of the American NGO Invisible Children – the LRM/A leader Joseph Kony as a madman. (Dolan 2009; Taub 2012; Titeca and Costeur 2015; Nibbe 2010).

Local civil society actors, prominent among which was the Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative that consisted of clerics from the region’s largest, that is, Catholic and Protestant churches, as well as representatives of the smaller Muslim and Orthodox communities, had worked hard to draw international attention to the protracted crisis. Civil society actors also took part in attempts to mediate the conflict, and debated and critiqued the policies of the various international actors involved in humanitarian and legal interventions in the region. They particularly sought to nuance the simplistic narratives which the Ugandan government constructed of the conflict – narratives which downplayed the role of the government and shifted all the blame for the war onto the shoulders of the LRM/A and the Acholi people (Apuuli
2011; Finnström 2008). Given the donor community’s desire to retain Uganda as a partner in advancing a neoliberal development agenda and fighting the ‘war against terrorism’, the government’s view on the war was largely left unchallenged, and the official narrative took the upper hand. The last set of peace talks, which had instigated a hiatus in the enormous cost to civilian lives caused by the government forces’ lengthy military campaign and the rebels’ concomitantly fierce retaliation, failed in 2008, and the LRM/A were driven out of northern Uganda by military force. (Allen 2010; Atkinson 2010; Schomerus 2012)

The conflict lingers to this day, while no longer being fought on Acholi soil. One of the LRM/A’s top leaders, Dominic Ongwen, is in The Hague facing trial at the ICC, although the case has become more a proving ground for the international legal system than a satisfying solution to the affected populations’ quest for justice or reparations (Allen 2006; E. K. Baines 2009; Branch 2011; see also Macdonald and Porter 2016). Kony and a small core of his troops have continued to torment local communities and evade capture in the border triangle between the Central African Republic, South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo, despite those countries’ and Uganda’s armed forces’ pursuit of the rebels, with assistance from special forces of the United States military (Finnström 2012). The politicised ethnic tensions that fed into and were exacerbated by the war prevail in Uganda’s day-to-day politics. Northern Uganda is still lagging behind the rest of the country’s socioeconomic development, and a strong sense of marginalisation, already rooted in the colonial era, prevails. Thousands of former rebels and abductees have returned to more or less civilian life, as they and their families struggle to find ways to co-inhabit the communities that years of war tore apart (Amony 2015; Dunovant 2016; Finnegan 2010; Mergelsberg 2012; Porter 2016; Whyte, Meinert, and Obika 2015). Among the Acholi, debates are still unresolved – and often hard even to address – about the reasons, justifications, and repercussions of the war, and many of the spiritual and cosmological concerns that have figured in important ways in and around the conflict remain unsettled (Harlacher et al. 2006; Meier 2013; Victor and Porter In review). Although the war is no longer fought on northern Ugandan soil with guns and tanks, its complex repercussions are therefore far from over.

**Defining confusion, rephrasing the research question**

‘Anyobanyoba tye’ or ‘there is confusion’, as my informants translated the phrase into English, is an oft-reoccurring sentiment and statement in Kitgum. The themes I followed in my ethnographic endeavours – the politics of the parishes I studied, Ugandan state and Kitgum district politics, and what I was beginning to think of as the politics of imagining a broader Christian, Acholi, or Ugandan community – were all unclear, hazy, and constantly evolving. As such, they often felt very confusing, perhaps obviously so for me, as an outsider trying to understand what was going on, but as I learned, also for my informants. Over the course of months, I became
increasingly familiar with phrases like, ‘I’m not quite sure’; ‘It’s hard to know exactly’; ‘Things there are a bit confused’; ‘Anyobanyoba tye’.

The first vocabulary for the Acholi language, collated by the Verona missionary Crazzolara, does not include anyobanyoba, but it translates nyôbô (using the orthography developed by Crazzolara and later replaced by a simpler one) as ‘to knead, mix together different materials’, as in to ‘squash porridge’, while li nyôbônyôbô, an adverb, refers to something mixed or massed together (Crazzolara 1955, 336). A more recent dictionary includes the word, spelt anyuba nyuba, and translates it simply as confusion (Odonga 2005, 14), as did all those informants who I asked about the word’s English equivalent. In place of Odonga’s spelling and pronunciation, I follow that used by my informants in Kitgum. English thesauruses define confusion as a situation ‘in which people are uncertain about what to do, or unable to understand something clearly’; ‘the feeling that you have when you do not understand what is happening, what is expected’, or ‘a state or situation in which many things are happening in a way that is not controlled or orderly’ (Free Merriam-Webster Dictionary 2014). These definitions of confusion highlight a sense of powerlessness and vulnerability, an inability to grasp or control what is going on, as central to confusion. This is certainly what I experienced in myself and in my surroundings in Kitgum, but my informants pointed out that anyobanyoba did not necessarily refer so much to an experienced inner or societal state, but to something purposefully created by those who somehow benefited from things being ‘confused’. It is here that the word’s equivalent in my maternal Finnish provides a key for understanding the way in which I choose to interpret anyobanyoba.

In Finnish, anyobanyoba translates as hämmennys, which, like the Acholi anyobanyoba, refers both to the act of stirring (e.g. a pot of porridge) – of confusing – and the state of being confused. Although in English ‘confusion’ can be taken to denote the act of con-fusion, of fusing together, the English term is intuitively associated primarily with a state of being, rather than an act. In contrast, anyobanyoba and its Finnish translation, hämmennys, instinctively capture the notion’s double meaning – the sense of confusion, and the act of confusing – much better than their English equivalent. Thus, confusion can be read as powerlessness and disorientation on the one hand, and purposeful creation and manipulation of that disorientation on the other. But my understanding of post-war Acholiland also suggests a third sense of the term, in that it is from confusion that hope may arise – in fact, embracing confusion may be what makes hope possible.

In the sense that ‘confusion’ relates to a state of mixed up affairs within a community, the term can also be used as a translation for a certain kind of politics. The first time I heard the word anyobanyoba used, was, in fact, when I asked an elderly Catholic gentleman to tell me how ‘church politics’, one of the things that most intrigued me during my fieldwork in Kitgum, would best be translated into Acholi: ‘Anyobanyoba i ekliśia’ (confusion in the church), was his reply. Church politics – the
power plays and decision-making processes that take place within churches, and the intertwining of churches and politics on a broader level – is still an essential subject of this study. But it is the way in which churches, politics, and church politics conditioned, and were challenged by, the imaginative force of communities and individuals, that I seek foremost to understand.

Rephrased, then, this study explores how churches as socially, politically, and materially embedded institutions, and as sites of, and providing resources for, narrative imagination, have influenced the process of reimagining community in the aftermath of war in northern Uganda.

Two important points arise from this formulation. First of all, the study is grounded in the view that the churches I study are socially, politically, and materially embedded institutions and communities. That is, as I describe in further detail in Chapter Three, I see churches as woven into the social networks of family, kinship, and friendship; into the political networks of party, government, and patronage; and into the material reality of land and property (see also Alava 2016a). Second, I view churches as providing resources for, and in themselves functioning as sites of, narrative imagination. As I describe in more detail in Chapter Two, my interest in understanding the negotiation of societal co-existence in the aftermath of war connects my interest in narrative imagination specifically to what I refer to as political narratives. Following Molly Andrews, I understand political narratives to refer both to stories individuals tell of how the world works, and to a repository of collective stories which can be about the state, as in Andrews’ study, or, as I argue in this study, also ethnicity or religion. Like Andrews, I hold that

    political narratives ... may or may not be explicitly about politics; often the most telling of them are not. But in the stories which [people] weave, individuals reveal how they position themselves within the communities in which they live, to whom or what they see themselves as belonging to / alienated from, how they construct notions of power, and the processes by which such power is negotiated.
(Andrews 2014, 87)

The analysis I present foregrounds the embeddedness of political narratives in the cosmological, political, social and material realities in which they take shape – an approach enabled by the study’s grounding in ethnographic research. Before presenting a methodological overview for the study, allow me to introduce the two main churches at which I watched, listened, learned and sang in Kitgum.

The parishes of Saint Mary of Immaculate Conception and Saint Janani Luwum

My days at Kitgum Mission began with song. It reached us through the windows of the beautiful ‘Doctor’s house’ in which my husband and our four- and one-year-old boys had been ensconced by the local parish priest. The windows opened onto the back of
the Church of Saint Mary of Immaculate Conception where early morning mass begins with songs by the girls’ school choir. With its whitewashed steeple, coloured glass windows, ornate wooden crucifix, elaborate stonework floor, and wall paintings of white prophets surrounded by black baby angels, the church is astounding. The mission station was founded by the Italian Catholic order of Verona missionaries (later renamed Comboni missionaries), who introduced the Catholic faith to Acholiland, and who continued to run the parish during my 2012-2013 fieldwork. On Sundays, the church is packed twice, with over 500 people attending both the English and the Acholi-language services. The church forms the heart of the mission station, which also includes a parish hall, catechumenate and retreat centres, compounds for the priests and for the Ugandan order of the Little Sisters of Mary Immaculate, a nursery school and kindergarten, the district’s largest and best-equipped hospital, two primary schools, and a secondary boarding school, thus comprising a significant hub of constant movement and activity alongside the town centre in Kitgum. Many of the people living near the parish descend from the initial converts, catechists, and labourers from different parts of Eastern Acholi who settled there in the early 1900s, giving this part of town a distinctly Catholic identity (see Alava and Shroff forthcoming).

Image 1. Kitgum Mission: the Church of St Mary of Immaculate Conception and, on the right, St Joseph’s Hospital. (Kitgum, February 2015)
Because ‘the Mission’, as the parish is usually called in Kitgum, provided my family with a home, it quite naturally also became one of my two ‘home parishes’ during fieldwork. This church, and the cool mornings when I stepped into the church and crossed myself before exchanging small smiles and sitting in a pew and taking out my notebook, provided a sense of calm amid the often stressful and hurry-filled routines of fieldwork. The morning services, where peaceful readings alternated in a perfectly choreographed manner with the singing that swelled up to fill the hall, were an aesthetically pleasurable part of my fieldwork. But the church was also large, and from where I usually sat, the priests seemed far away and distant. These services were not the place for friendly chit-chat between priest and parish or for improvisation. My sense was that the majority of people who came for service came in, sat through the service, and left, with little palpable feeling of community except among those who were engaged in volunteer activities at the church. Despite gently suggesting it to the parish priests, I was never introduced to the congregation, and consequently I suspect that many of those in the church assumed I was an Italian NGO worker, as many a meno (Acholi word for ‘white’ or ‘foreigner’) sitting in the church before me had been.

My other home parish, which I often walked to for second service after first mass had ended at Saint Mary’s, was quite different. The parish of Saint Janani Luwum, which is usually distinguished from the town’s other Protestant church by the name Town Parish, is tucked tightly between the parish primary school and the foundations of a much larger church under construction beside it. Between 2012 and 2016, I saw practically no progress in the construction; the Protestant Church has nowhere near the financial resources endowed to the Catholic mission by the Comboni. Other than the simple wooden cross at the front with some tassels hung across it and across the roof of the church, and white fabric draped over the reading pulpit and altar, the church is bare of decorations. But on Sunday mornings, the small space filled to the brim for two services, with about 200 people packed inside and many gathered outside the doors and windows in order to catch at least part of the sermon and the singing, while over a hundred children gathered in the adjacent school for Sunday School. The atmosphere at the services was intimate, and the Acholi, English, and Swahili praise songs, alternating with old Anglican hymns, all accompanied by the adungu (a string instrument), joyous and catchy. There was a strong sense of community at this church, something that I later learned to find surprising in light of the conflict that had only recently torn the parish apart (see Chapter Nine). From the first time I entered it, something about its atmosphere struck me as being worth sticking around to explore more.

Early on in my fieldwork I made the choice to focus on what was happening right in front of me, and to limit my research to places I could reach on foot or on the Mission’s old bicycle. During the first few months of fieldwork I visited a number of different churches in the town, especially the Catholic and Protestant sister churches of the Mission and Town Parish. In addition, two of my research assistants (more on
whom shortly), Chiara and Monica, took notes at some of those churches that I could not be at myself on any single Sunday morning. Even after I made the choice to focus on the Mission and Town Parish, I continued to drop in occasionally for a service or other event at one of the many other churches in town. This allowed me to get a sense of how what I was hearing at the two parishes at which I spent most of Sunday mornings fit into the bigger picture.

![Choir practice at the Town Parish, officially named after St Janani Luwum. Old church on the right, bigger church under construction on the left. (Kitgum, February 2015)](image2)

At Town Parish and the Mission I regularly attended and took detailed notes of the Sunday services, and took part in other services and celebrations such as weddings and parish feasts, parish meetings, and – a practice that proved to be both highly productive and enjoyable – sang with the choir. Since the choir at the Mission practiced irregularly and consisted mainly of secondary school students, I soon opted to commit only to the choir at Town Parish, which consisted of a heterogeneous group in terms of age and educational background. They welcomed me warmly, and for about the last four months of my fieldwork, and again in 2015, I sang with them many times a week, as well as on Sunday mornings.

Almost all of the people with whom I spent most of my time had taken on active roles in their churches. Alongside priests and catechists, these key informants included retired and active civil servants and teachers, as well as young adults who worked their families’ land while searching for employment that matched their degree
qualifications, or for funds to enable further studies. Most of the notable lay leaders at
the churches I studied, and hence also many of my informants, were comparatively
well off; often, they had studied beyond Senior 6 level or were from families with
educated children and were thus considered successful, even if that did not necessarily
entail financial success or even stability (Meinert 2009; see also Melber 2016). Although practically all of my key informants stood out as active Catholics or
Protestants, and were recognised as such by their families and community, it is
important to note, along with Ravalde (2017) in her study of a rural parish in
Kaberamaido in Eastern Uganda, that the Catholic Church does not wield all-
embracing influence upon its members’ ethical practice. This is the case in Kitgum
and also applies to the Protestant and Pentecostal-Charismatic churches, although a
certain laxity and openness to accommodation characterises the Catholic Church in a
special way (Alava forthcoming). Many of my informants – both Catholic and
Protestant – had not married in church (Alava 2017b); they expressed reservations
about the spiritual authority or infallibility of their churches; and they retained
practices and beliefs that an orthodox variant of Catholicism or Anglicanism would
not recognise (see Chapter Three). The extent of their adherence to their church’s
doctrine or moral guidelines was, however, not something I specifically queried; for
the purposes of this study, what was relevant was their self-identification as active and
committed members of their church communities.

Fieldwork, writingwork, analysis

Between 2012 and 2016, I spent altogether nine and a half months in Uganda, most
of that time in Kitgum town, and most of the time in Kitgum at what became my two
case study parishes in company with their active members. My first experience of the
town dates back to 2006, when I was in Uganda for some months interning for the
Lutheran World Federation. During this time I spent close to three weeks in Kitgum
conducting interviews for my master’s thesis on interactions between development
intervention and conflict in northern Uganda (Alava 2008). Six years later I returned
to the town for my longest stretch of fieldwork, from September 2012 to April 2013,
this time with my husband and two children. After two years of writing, I returned for
three weeks in 2015 in order to participate in the centenary celebrations of Kitgum
Mission, and again a year later with funding from the LSE’s Justice and Security
Research Programme, to conduct research on the country’s presidential elections
(Alava and Ssentongo 2016). These later trips enabled me to fill in gaps, and allowed
pieces of my work to be read and commented upon by some of my informants.

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4 The numerous schools, government offices, banks, and businesses in Kitgum town provide many of its residents with affluence. However, 66% of households in the central municipal zone rely on subsistence farming for their primary income, and 22% of households receive less than two meals a day, which is close to the average level within the district as a whole (UBOS 2014)
With the help of a South Sudanese Acholi-speaker, Sarah Kassiba, I had already learned some basic Acholi in Finland. In Kitgum, I took formal lessons with Ladit Obwoch, a retired teacher and neighbour of the Catholic mission, in addition to which I stubbornly tried to use what I had learned, and to learn more, in everyday encounters. This was not always easy, since most of the people with whom I interacted tended to respond to my Acholi phrases in English. By the end of my fieldwork, however, I could find my way through simple discussions in Acholi, often follow the gist of speeches and translated interviews, and identify and ask for clarification of central concepts with which I was not familiar. Observation and note-taking at many of the events I discuss in the study was facilitated by the fact that they were held either exclusively in English, or were simultaneously translated from English to Acholi or vice versa. During those events at which Acholi was exclusively used, and during interviews, I was, however, dependent on translation.

Throughout my fieldwork, I relied greatly on the kind and able assistance of Lakareber Chiara, a religious studies and history teacher, who in 2012-2013 was waiting for her degree certificates to be issued so that she could start applying for work. Almost daily, Chiara and I met to discuss our progress and to plan the next steps, either at my home, or at that of Chiara’s sister with whom she stayed. Chiara accompanied me whenever I needed translation, and often also to events and interviews that took place in English. In some situations, having her with me seemed to put my informants on guard, so I returned alone; in other situations her presence was instrumental. Chiara had previously worked at the Catholic Mission, her mother worked at the hospital, and her sister was a Reverend Sister, meaning that many of my Catholic informants knew her family and assumed she would understand some issues without explanation. On the other hand, Protestant informants who recognised Chiara as Catholic sometimes phrased their answers with explicit reference to her Catholicism.

Orach Francis and Acan Monica transcribed those of my interviews that I felt comfortable having others transcribe, often adding their own insightful comments to the transcripts. To aid in the final choice of case study parishes, Chiara and Orach conducted a small survey with pastors of Pentecostal / Charismatic churches in Kitgum, which enabled me to get a rough idea of their size. In addition, they helped recruit a group of twelve young adults to conduct participant observation at churches on Christmas morning, after which we met to compare notes and discuss issues of interest. In 2015 and 2016, Rom Lawrence also stepped in to help with translation and transcription, and to take notes of some events that I could not attend.

In 2012-2013, Chiara and I conducted just over one hundred formal semi-structured interviews ranging from one to three hours in length. In many cases, the discussions that ensued outside of the official interviews were much more interesting than the original interviews, but at times the recordings were crucial for checking detailed and often contradictory accounts of, for instance, disputes in the churches.
addition to the key informants I mention above, many of whom I interviewed formally more than once, I conducted interviews with relevant district and municipal politicians and administrators. While researching the history of the Catholic Mission and the Protestant diocese headquarters, and the ongoing land disputes at both, Chiara identified relevant stakeholders and conducted preliminary interviews in Acholi, after which we returned to conduct further interviews with key individuals together. In 2015 and 2016 I spoke again at length to almost all of my key informants, with some of whom I have remained in contact.

With a few exceptions, I have replaced the names of my informants with pseudonyms. In some situations I go even further, blurring as many details as required to ensure anonymity, including age, gender, and denomination. These would, of course, have added depth and colour to the reader’s interpretation; however, in light of the political tensions in Uganda (see Chapters Two-Five), and considering that many of the disputes within the churches I studied involved pending court cases and other contentious matters (see Chapter Nine), I have chosen rather to err on the side of caution than to risk revealing too much.

No amount of interviewing or note-taking at church events could have replaced what I learned through participating in and observing life outside of formal moments of ‘data-gathering’: choir practice and performances; after-church chats; visits to the homes of parish members; discussions with research assistants over meals or cups of tea; visits with friends at the hospital or the times spent queuing for the doctor when my own children fell ill; being taught how to prepare malakwang by the ladies who helped us with our children and housework or in turn teaching them how to bake Finnish cinnamon rolls. Little snippets of conversations and observations of everyday life gradually accumulated and, together with formal interviews I was conducting, allowed me to ask better questions, formulate ideas, and refocus my interests.

At the end of each day, drawing from what Sanjek (1990) terms ‘headnotes’ and – where it had been possible to scratch things down in my notebooks – ‘fieldnotes’, I recorded what had happened during the day in what ultimately became a very long fieldwork diary. In it I included careful reconstructions of events and conversations that stood out as notable, in many of which I had participated so as to write about them afterwards (see Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 2011). But I also wrote about things that were happening at my home, and kept track of what was happening in my head: how my thoughts, ideas, and emotions were evolving, and how what I was learning could refocus my inquiries. At first I tried using different fonts or styles to distinguish analysis from emotion, but was constantly faced with the difficulty of doing so, thus giving in to what Taussig describes as the ‘furtive forms and mix of private and public’ in fieldnotes (2015, 76). I was learning, through experience, one consequence of the embodied nature of ethnographic research (see Chapter Five).

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5 An Acholi delicacy prepared from bitter spinach-type vegetables and groundnut paste.
Image 3. Lakareber Chiara and I enjoying a moment of shade under an umbrella passed around the crowd during Mass at the commemoration of the Acholi martyrs. (Paimol, October 2012)

Image 4. Interviewing one of the catechists of the Catholic Mission with Chiara. (Kitgum, March 2013)
Alongside the formal interviews and fieldwork diary, I accumulated a small suitcase of secondary data. Its most important content was provided by informants who allowed me to copy court documents, letters, and maps related to the land disputes at the Protestant and Catholic missions (Alava and Shroff forthcoming), as well as to the conflict within the Protestant diocese (Chapter Nine). On a daily basis, I also read, annotated, and with Chiara’s assistance categorised for later use, articles on religion, politics, and northern Uganda from the independently owned Daily Monitor and the government’s New Vision. Finally, I searched for references to Acholiland in those of the Church Missionary Society archives that are available online (Adam Matthew Digital 2017).

As I discuss in Chapter Five, the very notion of ‘data’, as something tangible that can be extracted from experience and subsequently coded and analysed, blurs the interpersonal nature of ethnographic knowledge production; moreover, the handbook division of research into ‘data collection’ and ‘analysis’ suggests a false discontinuity. Yet more formalised acts of analysis did take place upon my return home from Uganda: at my desk, I read through all the interviews, my fieldwork diary, and the secondary data, using the qualitative analysis software Atlas.ti to simultaneously code the materials in a manner similar to that described by Davies (2008, 202–13). This allowed me to recognise recurrent themes, which were sharpened further in my mind as I sought out literature relevant to the issues defined by analysis. Once all the materials were processed, I used the software to lift out those segments of the data that related to particular themes that caught my interest and held a prominent place in the data, such as ‘mission’, ‘silence’, ‘hopes for the future’, ‘confusion’, ‘politics’, ‘the state’, or ‘church disputes’. I then re-read and analysed these data segments carefully, during which process particular events, discussions, or speeches emerged as particularly central for the arguments I was beginning to form through the ‘writingwork’ (Taussig 2015) that commences when fieldnotes begin to transform into academic texts. Some of these ‘magnified moments’ (Hollander 2004, 605), illustrative and revealing as they were of broader patterns and issues prevalent throughout the data, became the cores of individual chapters.

Limitations, biases and themes unexplored

The above methodological overview hints at limitations and biases that I wish to explicate before moving on to reflect on questions of positionality. This ethnography focuses on small-town urban parishes, where most of my key informants were clergy and committed members, many of them in lay leadership positions, and hence moderately wealthy and well-educated. It is likely that there would have been different themes and analyses had my focus been on small village chapels or the cathedrals in

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6 Other codes became the starting points of individual articles, such as ‘youth’ (Alava 2017a), ‘family and sexuality’ (Alava 2017b), and ‘land’ (Alava and Shroff forthcoming).
Kampala; on those church members who never attended church or did so only rarely; on members who had little formal education and had not had to learn the language of Uganda’s former coloniser; or on those who lived in dire poverty. Furthermore, my study’s driving thematic interest in the intersections of politics and religion left many interesting questions out of its purview.⁷

Perhaps most glaring is the omission of Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity in the region, the growth of which has had profound influence on religious and political dynamics, and individual adherents’ lives. However, due to both the long-term and more recent roles played by the Protestant and Catholic Churches in Acholiland (see Chapters Three and Four), I considered it pertinent to narrow my focus to them. Even then, the scope of the study was much to handle, and to have added another church, and all the recent literature on PCCs in Africa that would have come with it (see for instance Bergunder et al. 2010; Hasu 2012; Kalu 2008; Olsson 2016; Meyer 2011), would have rendered the task nigh impossible. The buzz of research activity around PCCs seems also at times to have helpfully blurred from view the fact that mainline churches continue to retain and gain members, and to wield considerable influence on Ugandan society. That said, the interrelations of PCCs and politics (see Alava and Ssentongo 2016 for brief observations on the theme in Acholi), and the ways in which PCCs function as sites of re-imagining communities in the aftermath of the northern Ugandan war, would certainly be worthy topics for in-depth studies of their own.

Religious positionalities

Lauterbach (2013) has suggested that rather than thinking of the researcher as occupying a position either as an insider or outsider in the religious communities she studies, more insight can be gained by thinking of the researcher as a chameleon that alternates between various ‘insides’ and ‘outsides’ during the research process. In Chapter Five I reflect in more depth on positionality and its epistemological repercussions for ethnography as I have attempted to practice it. Here, I limit myself to considering my chameleon-like positionality in specific relation to the sites of my research – two mainline Christian churches – and, in the coming section, in relation to my academic field.

As a child of two Lutheran pastors and the wife of another, my life has been highly influenced by a particular Christian tradition. Yet to say that I have been socialised into a Finnish variant of Lutheranism is insufficient, first of all because this category spans a broad range of theological and social ethical emphases, but also because I

⁷ Recently, some of the notable debates in and around the anthropology of Christianity which I have left out of this study have been addressed ethnographically in nearby regions: Ryan O’Byrne’s (2016) study explores religio-cosmological subjectivities and Christian conversions among South Sudanese Acholis, Lars Hedegaard Williams’ on-going PhD research analyses healing in a Pentecostal church in Gulu (see Williams and Meinert 2017), while Liz Ravalde’s (2017) study highlights the ways in which institutional religion is appropriated by the average, not often church-going Catholic.
spent two of my childhood and a further two of my pre-teen years in Hong Kong. There I was moulded by both the cosmopolitan, multi-ethnic, and multi-religious reality of an international school, and a mix of Christian orientations, including a Cantonese-speaking Lutheran church that my parents worked for, an American-style Evangelical youth group, and Catholic as well as high church and low church Anglican parishes which we attended as a family. My take on Christianity was further defined in my early twenties in Finland, when I dedicated countless hours of volunteer work to movements within the Lutheran Church that campaigned for global justice and increased and improved development aid. My personal background, who I was, and that I was open about it with my informants in Kitgum, has been of relevance in many ways. It influenced my ability to understand and gain entry into the social setting I was studying, and it influenced the way in which my informants related to me.

In terms of what people told me and how they told it, it mattered that I identified myself, and they identified me, as a Christian; it allowed my informants to distinguish me from the many munion they had encountered who did not belong to a church or take part in church services, including, I was told, most of the researchers they had encountered. It also mattered that I was not ‘born-again’, since born-again munion in the region were without exception considered missionaries. Furthermore, particularly when discussing issues related to inter-church relations in Acholiland and in Kitgum, it mattered greatly that I was neither Catholic nor Anglican. As a Lutheran,8 I could be appropriated as ‘one of us’ and, in a sense, as an ally by both churches.

I myself felt that I had two ‘home parishes’ in Kitgum. My personal history helped me feel at ease in both since, due to my years in Hong Kong, I was familiar with many of their hymns and their orders of service. My almost daily encounters with many of the workers and active volunteers of the Mission, where I lived and spent much of my free time with my family, made me feel very much at home there, but in other ways I experienced a warmer affinity with the Protestant Town Parish, particularly after I joined the choir.

But my personal history and worldviews mattered beyond how I was positioned in the field. It also influenced my choices of topic and interpretation of my data, which is

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8The Lutheran Church is one of the oldest churches to have grown out of the Reformation and is the largest church in Finland. While the largest Lutheran churches today are in fact those in Tanzania and Ethiopia, the Lutheran Church does not have a notable presence in Uganda, and does not exist at all in the country’s northern regions. It is thus virtually unknown to all but those who have formal theological training or are versed in European history. What most people in Kitgum associate the word ‘Lutheran’ with is the Lutheran World Federation, which has run a long-term development programme from a regional office based in the town. I was thus often asked to explain what the Lutheran Church teaches and how they pray. In these situations I described my own church as close in doctrine to the Church of England, but also that the Catholic Church felt familiar to me, since its order of service was almost identical to that used in my own.
something I attempt to be openly reflexive about throughout this thesis. Firstly, the internationally oriented and social justice-driven grassroots ecumenism in which I grew up has shaped me to highly value tolerance, respect, and a willingness to learn across the boundaries of worldviews. When, for instance, I was once asked at Town Parish to pray out loud after observing a parish council election, it felt natural and honest for me to pray for mutual understanding and respect within the parish, among Christians in Kitgum, and throughout the world.

The strands of Christian theology with which I have grown to feel most comfortable, strands that emphasise divine mystery over human certainty, sit comfortably with what scholars of religion commonly refer to as methodological agnosticism (Drogers 2012; Ezzy 2004). That is, I view ‘the productive nature of uncertainty in the study of belief as an epistemologically and methodologically constructive standpoint’ (Bell and Taylor 2013, 514). For Ezzy,

the focus of a hermeneutically and phenomenologically orientated ethnographic methodology is the way people tell their stories, rather than the accuracy or otherwise of the account. Neither the realities of spiritual experience, nor the integral role of social and cultural processes that shape interpretation are ignored. (2004, 124)

In other words, while acknowledging an affinity with the religious communities I study, my analysis in no way presumes or claims – or disclaims – these religious communities to hold an accurate or true interpretation of the world, or that their doctrines are more, or less, valid than those of other worldviews. I thus feel little affinity either with those who have aimed to expose Christianity to ridicule, or with those whose work has sought to prove God’s existence via anthropological analysis; both types having held prominent place in the history of anthropology (Larsen 2014). Finally, I consider religion to have both the potential to be a ‘positive’ social force, as well as a highly ‘negative’ one (Alava 2015). Whether it is either / or, or something much more ambivalent, is not, in my view, a question to be resolved via purely rational deliberation, nor a question of normative preference. Rather, it is a highly context-dependent question demanding empirical exploration, which this study in part also undertakes.

Family, failure and fatigue in fieldwork

What remains to be discussed before outlining the remainder of this study is the extent to which my family’s being in the field impacted on my fieldwork, and in subsequence, on this study as a whole. Their presence and the everyday routines of our life together forced me to shift gear each day from the high-intensity social, analytical, and emotional fireworks of fieldwork. Our home functioned as an island of familiarity amid all that was unfamiliar, enveloping me in the ups and downs, from tantrums to giggles and cuddles, which life with small children entailed. But in a
society in which sociality and neighbourliness is highly valued, the fact that we daily 
spent a considerable amount of time insulated from our surroundings, in a house of 
our own where we often ate our meals alone, set us apart even more than the tone of 
our skin and the passports in our pockets (to use Finnström’s [2008] poignant phrase). 

During my fieldwork, I fantasised about writing an article with the title *Familial failure in fieldwork*. In it I planned to dwell on how my family’s presence in the field 
prohibited me from doing everything I wanted, and on how my family’s failure to 
conform to the social expectations of people around us frustrated my attempts to fit 
in. As mother and wife, I occupied what was considered a respectable role in the 
Acholi moral world (Callaway 1992; Porter 2016). Furthermore, I was ‘married in 
church’, which was considered particularly upright in the eyes of my Christian 
informants, albeit somewhat unusual for someone my age (see Alava 2017b). Yet my 
being the working mother and wife, while my husband stayed at home, complicated 
matters, as did the fact that my children were in many ways so differently socialised to 
those of our friends and neighbours.

For example, taking my children with me to church was nerve wracking, since they 
did not behave as well (sit as still and fidget as little) as Acholi children. But to leave 
them at home (as I almost always did) was unthinkable for those of my informants 
with children of their own. Social visits without my family would have been 
considered odd, but constant meetings with people my children did not know and 
whose language they did not speak was also exhausting, particularly for my then four-
year-old, whose reservedness and sensitivity to touch made the friendly attention of 
adults and children alike highly stressful. Thus, as the day and my children finally 
wound down, I sat to write my fieldwork diary feeling utterly insufficient: I was seeing 
too little of my sleeping children and too little of my husband, but I was also failing to 
be wherever it was that – on the nights when the power was off and Acholi pop did 
not saturate the soundscape – I could hear the beating of drums.

My mind was heavy with the thought that it was there, somewhere I was not and 
could not be, that a real ethnographer – brave, independent, single, and speaking the 
local language fluently – would have been: a modern-day Malinowski (confessional 
diary [1989] notwithstanding) who, thoroughly separated from kin, emerges from the 
trials of fieldwork as a full member of his professional clan, with whom he (for does 
not the ideal invoke a ‘he’?) may then revel in memories of evenings spent with 
informants in the light of the stars and a crackling fire. Despite persistent 
authoritative critiques of the mystification of fieldwork into a rite of passage (Rabinow 
1977; Trouillot 2003b), the ideal, in my experience, remains largely intact in the 
clichés that pepper ethnographers’ shop talk. Ironically, even critiques of the norms 
and presuppositions implicit in this ideal seem to perpetuate its place as an unspoken 
yardstick of ‘good research’.
Image 5. My son Wilho dancing with a newfound friend during a celebration to welcome a new parish priest. (Gulu, September 2013)

Image 6. Shopping for groceries with my family. (Kitgum town, February 2013)
Although I acknowledge with humility and awe the kind of insight and understanding that committed, long-term participation can produce (see for instance Holly Porter’s award-winning and breath-taking book [2016]), I have in hindsight also learned to be critical of how easily fieldwork accounts create the illusion of seamless success, and of the false epistemological certainty that may follow from alleged total immersion in ‘local’ lifeworlds. Furthermore, there is reason to query the idealisation of separation and immersion implicit in the rite-of-passage model of fieldwork as guarantors of ethnographic depth and validity: what are its gendered impacts; where does it leave those with elderly or young dependents; and what does it demand of the researcher’s psyche?

The truth is, as comfortable, safe, and privileged as my family and I were, and as thankful as we remain for the chance we had to share a small part of our life with people who welcomed us into theirs, fieldwork was exhausting for all of us. A mid-fieldwork near-burnout (triggered, among other things, by the cobra that my children found hissing at them in our yard) forced me to realise that I was over-stretching, and prompted a change in routines; rather than writing late into the night, I started allocating time for writing in the day, and spent the evenings watching Downtown Abbey with my husband instead. Memories of those evenings, and of singing my children to sleep under the mosquito net to the accompaniment of crickets outside, hold prominent place among the memories I revel in – not of success or failure, but of life in the field.

In part, it has been precisely my acknowledgement of fatigue and failure, of the limitations I encountered in myself as an ethnographer, of vulnerability, that has led me to tune in on confusion as a meaningful object and method of analysis, and to allow it to dismantle the desire for certainty and control that is historically planted into the very heart of the research endeavour.

The structure of the thesis

This thesis presents an analysis of mainline Christianity and politics in the aftermath of war in northern Uganda. To do so, it utilises the Acholi notion of anyobanyoba, confusion, as a route into analysing how, in the aftermath of war, community is imagined amid, and through, silence, fear, and hope. By focusing on the Catholic and Protestant Churches, the two largest religious communities in the region, the study highlights a previously underexplored aspect of the social and political context of Acholiland. The study’s main argument – that these churches, as politically, socially, cosmetically, and materially embedded institutions and communities, function as sites of political imagination and provide their members with resources for imagining community – is unpacked in the following steps:

Chapter Two develops the analytical concepts and theoretical debates that orient my analysis, spanning from anthropological and other social scientific to theological debates concerning Christianity and politics, narrative and imagination, and the
ontological underpinnings of social realities and their study. Subsequent chapters pick up threads provided in this theoretical framework, weaving in additional concepts from discussions specific to each chapter’s analysis.

Chapters Three and Four provide my reading of the historical context against which the analysis in subsequent chapters is set. Instead of delivering a narrative historical account, however, the chapters suggest an analytical reading of the past through the present, and through the lens of the two case study parishes in Kitgum. Chapter Three traces the relationship of mainline churches and the colonial state in Uganda. It elaborates on the notion of embeddedness, and develops a model for analysing three primary forms of church embeddedness. By way of an analysis of how the deaths of two Catholic Acholi catechists in the early years of missionary activity in Acholiland have been re-signified a century later, the chapter closes with reflection on how the past continues to influence the present.

Chapter Four turns to exploring the relationship between politics and mainline churches in independent Uganda, particularly during the northern Ugandan war. The chapter ends with reflections on the difficulties of speaking and writing in an adequate way of this period in the region’s past. This sets the stage for Chapter Five, where I introduce Kitgum as a town emerging from war. Through reflection on how my own interpretation of the ‘sense’ of Kitgum has changed, and how my reading of silence and trauma has evolved, this chapter also elaborates on the methodological and epistemological underpinnings of my study, including reflection on the ethical questions pertaining to fieldwork and research in the aftermath of war.

In Chapter Six, I turn my attention to contemporary Acholi conceptualisations of politics. I show how an understanding of politics as cung i wibye, or standing atop an anthill, prevails in everyday discussion and notions of politics in Kitgum, and analyse a particularly elaborate moment of cung i wibye, the burial of a prominent opposition politician, as an example of how the Ugandan state is performed and negotiated in church settings. Chapter Seven develops the argument made in Chapter Six, asserting that the efficacy of public performances of politics draws from the underside of anthills: from the fear, silence, and ambivalence that cuts across the everyday in post-war northern Uganda. While in Chapter Five I focused on silence and confusion as they related to the past, Chapter Seven argues that silence and confusion grow also from silenced political and communal tensions in the present.

Chapter Eight mirrors the movement that I argue characterises Acholi lifeworlds in the post-war moment, by turning from fear and ambivalence to peace, forgiveness, hope, and moving on. I show how mainline churches have provided alternative, less violent, imaginaries for the future in Acholiland, and discuss how these churches and their members orient towards peace, forgiveness, and moving on in everyday lives. Utilising analytical concepts from Utopian Studies, I argue that a Utopia of Peace has emerged as a response to the ambivalences and conflicts of the post-war moment, yet conclude by showing how peaceful narratives can be performed against excluded
‘others’ in ways that are at times most profoundly violent. Chapter Nine turns to moments when contests over power and resources unsettle the utopian ideals of unity and peace described in Chapter Eight. It shows how the ‘confusion’ that results from the material, social, and political embeddedness of churches in the local community provides the driving force for the Utopia of Peace yet, paradoxically, also sets the Utopia its insurmountable boundaries. Chapter Ten ends the study by summarising its main arguments, and by reflecting on lines of thought I introduce in the theoretical orientations to which we now turn.
Chapter 2

Embodied theoretical orientations

It is something of a public secret that the theory sections in theses are often written at a very late stage in the writing process. Sometimes this is even considered a sign of successful research – proof that the concepts and theories that frame the analysis have emerged from the researchers’ immersion in fieldwork and the data it produced. Yet the final monograph format easily obfuscates this reality. Set at the beginning of the study, ‘theory’ appears, and is often deliberately presented, as an edifice of coherent formative ideas and conceptual tools that have guided and been applied, with more or less effect, to the task of analysis in the chapters that follow. There is pressure to appear coherent, to prove that one has read the right books, to prove that one ‘knows theory’. But what exactly is it that one needs to prove one knows? And what is the price one has to pay to make that proof coherent?

Something I read only weeks before completing this thesis prodded me to reframe ‘my theory’, not with a catch-all description of the concepts and thoughts that will logically follow, but with acknowledgement of the winding routes by way of which this chapter has developed. In her book ‘Queer phenomenology’, Sara Ahmed writes of lines:

I have always been struck by the phrase ‘a path well trodden.’ A path is made by the repetition of the event of the ground ‘being trodden’ upon. We can see the path as a trace of past journeys ... And when we see the line of the path before us, we tend to walk upon it, as a path ‘clears’ the way. So we walk on the path as it is before us, but it is only before us as an effect of being walked upon ... Lines are both created by being followed and are followed by being created. The lines that direct us, as lines of thought as well as lines of motion, are in this way performative: they depend on the repetition of thoughts and conventions, of routes and paths taken, but they are also created as an effect of this repetition. (Ahmed 2006, 16)

Disciplines discipline. As Ahmed puts it, they have ‘a specific “take” on the world, a way of ordering time and space through the very decisions about what counts as within the discipline’ (ibid., 22). Not only do disciplines teach us to follow lines of thought; our worth and potential as researchers can be measured on the basis of our ability to show that we know the paths, that we have chosen the best among them, and then followed. As Cerwonka (2007) has noted in her analysis of the stakes in multidisciplinary research, to choose to step off the paths well trodden is to risk one’s place as a member of this or that discipline, to risk not being published, not being quoted, not ever getting tenure.
[1] In landscape architecture, they use the word ‘desire lines’ to describe unofficial paths, those marks left on the ground that show everyday comings and goings, where people deviate from paths they are supposed to follow. Deviation leaves its marks on the ground, which can even help generate alternative lines, which cross the ground in unexpected ways. (Ahmed 2006, 19-20)

Coming across Ahmed’s use of the notion of ‘desire lines’ for the first time made my mind ‘click’, just as she describes feminist readings having been a series of continuous ‘clicks’ for her (2017, 29), and as they have increasingly been towards the end of the PhD process for me. Click. That is what I have been doing all along. Following desire lines. Although Ahmed describes the concept in specific relation to queerness and sexual desire, her discussion evoked for me a memory of a moment in the early days after my fieldwork, when I decided that rather than making my study ‘fit’ one paradigm or debate or another, what was paramount for me was that I write a book that I desire to write. To recall that moment now, four years later, is to recall a strong sensation, a desire, to practice the art of writing in a way that leads me along paths I want to tread, paths that truly speak to what I learned in Kitgum and to what I am trying to understand, not paths I feel I must. And so, this study, and its ‘theory’, is the way it is: a stroll along some pathways well trodden, but by way of desire paths that swerve off and re-connect through thoughts that seek out routes of their own. Hence the title of this chapter, which sketches out not a theoretical framework, scaffolding, or grid, but ‘orientations’: something that is not ready and set, but moves forwards, turning, searching, and acknowledging that orientation and disorientation demarcate each other.

Employing the notion of orientation also foregrounds the understanding of theory as embodied, for, as Ahmed, drawing on phenomenologist philosophers, writes: ‘The starting point for orientation is the point from which the world unfolds: the “here” of the body and the “where” of its dwelling’ (2006, 8).

**What is politics, if not about the state?**

To understand the embodied orientations that shape this study, it is crucial to acknowledge that my fieldwork was underpinned by an implicit understanding that the most crucial and most interesting object of politics was the state: an understanding implicit even in my disciplinary location at the University of Helsinki, the name of which translates literally as the faculty of ‘state sciences’, as opposed to ‘society sciences’ as at other Finnish Universities. My search for ‘politics’ in the churches I studied in Kitgum thus translated into a search for the state: for church / state interaction, and for what I thought of as the ‘statelike qualities’ (Lund 2006) of the churches themselves.

What was, as I explain, an utterly gendered theoretical understanding of politics as always occurring in relation to the state, and as something that belongs to the public realm, led me constantly to make subconscious distinctions in my fieldwork. The
public was the object of my research, while the private remained the realm of my family, and as such, outside my core focus. Such conceptualisations, I argue, are embedded in more fundamental dichotomies that structure thinking about ethnography and knowledge in general, and which as Malkki (2007, 173–77) shows, have relevance for ethnographic fieldwork, analysis, and writing. While ‘feminine’, ‘soft’, ‘feeling’, and ‘subjective’ (ibid.) are assumed to belong to the private sphere, so ‘masculine’, ‘hard’, ‘measurement’, and ‘objective’ (ibid.) are the province of the public.

_image 7. While men often occupy the seats on the podium, one of the roles for women at parish celebrations is to prepare beautiful cakes which the men then ceremoniously cut. (Kitgum, December 2012)_

When commenting on a book project by Malkki and her former supervisee Allaine Cerwonka, in which the two published the correspondence they had shared during Cerwonka’s PhD fieldwork (Cerwonka and Malkki 2007), a senior (male) scholar had requested that the two women cut the ‘babies and washing machines’ (Malkki 2007, 177) from the correspondence, and rather write a real methods book focusing on things of real academic interest. Half-way through my fieldwork, it dawned on me that I was doing exactly what the senior male scholar had requested of Cerwonka and Malkki: I was, metaphorically, cutting the babies and laundry from my ethnography. While I poured the entirety of my fieldwork experience, including what happened in my home, into my fieldwork diary, I conceptualized the space of my home and many of the things I encountered in my domestic roles – including visiting other mothers
with my children in tow – as peripheral to the hard scholarly core of my research. Furthermore, since I had not problematised the gendered hierarchies inherent to both politics and churches in Acholi, I was spending far more time with men than with women (ironically, following the advice of the Verona priest and forerunner of Acholi ethnography, Cazzolara, that anthropologists spend more time with important Acholi men than digging in fields [Cazzolara 1950, 9, footnote]).

The theoretical notions embodied in me at the time – notions concerning what was sufficiently ‘political’ to be granted attention – led me constantly to strive to separate my domestic, affective, family-oriented, mothering life at home from my public, rational, independent, professional research work in ‘the field’. When I left my domestic role, and went to some event, or to an interviewee’s home as the ethnographer, I was most often positioned in the locus of men. This is clearly an issue with methodological repercussions, but it is also of considerable epistemological significance. As I explain in further detail in Chapter Five, a notion of embodiment encourages the ethnographer to see herself, and her body, as situated ‘between’ theory and data. The theoretical concepts that had become engrained in my thinking contributed to the positioning of my body in time as well as physical and social space during fieldwork. In this sense, theory can be conceptualized as a constitutive part of the researcher’s subjectivity, ‘an amalgam of the persuasions that stem from the circumstances of one’s class, status, and values, interacting with the particulars of one’s object of investigation, [which] operates during the entire research process’ (Peshkin 1982, quoted in Bresler 2006). The theoretical preconceptions, and the subsequent locations I adopted as a fieldworker, set the frame for my observations and interpretations. Subsequently and simultaneously, the embodying of new theoretical ideas and empirical data also cajoled me towards new ways of seeing, thinking, and interpreting (Alava 2016b).

In his provocative analysis of ‘the politics of suffering and smiling’ in Africa, Patrick Chabal has written:

> We are used to reading political analysis as the application of specific theories to circumscribed areas of political life in Africa: governance, elections, democracy, state, civil society, political economy, law, international relations, and so on. If this can sometimes be useful as a comparative device, it is also constraining, if not downright misleading. (Chabal 2009, 172–73)

While Chabal’s sweeping and somewhat essentialising statements about ‘African politics’ have received valid criticism, his critique of unproductively constricting theoretical windows has provided important inspiration for this study’s attempts to navigate theory. Chabal’s concerns about theory that shackles analysis have also been reflected in recent literature on religion and politics in Africa that has called for critical awareness of over-emphasis of the state in studies of African politics. As Ellis and Ter Haar (2004, 2007) have argued, what is often embedded in these emphases is
the assumption of the desirability of a process of pre-determined state-formation. Research on Christianity and politics has thus drawn from alternative perspectives: for instance, Lund’s (2006) notion of ‘twilight institutions’, which casts light on the ‘less and more state’ actors who take part in the processes of negotiating public authority. In this vein, Jones (2008) has underscored the crucial role played by churches, among other non-state actors, in social change. Yet even when the focus is on ‘less and more state’ actors, I argue, the state remains the yardstick, leading to attention intuitively gearing towards issues like those listed by Chabal (2009) – governance, elections, democracy, state, civil society, and so on – rather than ‘to the politics of suffering and smiling’, as Chabal does in his own provocations (ibid.).

Throughout this study, I pay considerable attention to the politics of the state in Uganda, but rather than seeing the state as the monolithic pinnacle of politics, I have come to adopt a much more processual and partial understanding of it (see e.g. Trouillot 2001). I argue that the politics of what is often experienced as the distant state, and of what could be referred to as the morality of one’s immediate surroundings – of the everyday lifeworlds of families, villages, clans, or parishes – are intimately connected. Both the talk about politics of the state, of political parties, or of district councils, and the talk about the micropolitics of morality – of behaviour, kinship, land ownership, or propriety – function as a language with which community is imagined and disappointment at the apparent failure of community is expressed. Consequently, the concepts I have found most useful for analysing politics understood in this way are confusion, silence, fear, and hope. It is through reflections framed by these concepts and the on-going academic debates attached to them that this study also speaks to broader discussions of Christianity and politics in contemporary Africa.

**Christianity, politics, and publics in Sub-Saharan Africa**

Scholars on African religion and politics increasingly agree that the two are entangled, and that to understand their significance in African societies it is necessary to abandon assumptions of the inevitability of the continent’s secularisation and democratisation following a ‘Western’ model. Beyond this consensus there is, however, considerable variation in focus and analytical approach. Research concentrating on formal politics has looked at the institutionalised relationships of religious elites and the state (Holger Bernt Hansen 1984; Ward 2005), the impact of religion on people’s interest in politics (Manglos and Weimreb 2013) and electoral behaviour (Takyi, Opoku-Agyeman, and Kutin-Mensah 2010), and the role of religion in democratisation (Dowd 2015; Gifford 1995; Kassimir 1998; Okuku 2003). Parallel to these debates, and in part triggered by the phenomenal growth of Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity in Africa, more culturally oriented scholarship has

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9 With the kind agreement of Jimmy Spire Ssentongo, much of this section is based on a literature review I wrote for our co-authored article (Alava and Ssentongo 2016).
highlighted the importance of religious healing, ritual, community, and belief in African lifeworlds. Seeking to destabilise the dichotomies of state-society, public-private, and secular-profane, this research has pushed analysis to explore the political nature of religion in itself (Bompani and Frahm-Arp 2010; J. Comaroff and Comaroff 1991; Ellis and ter Haar 2007; Englund 2011a).

One way of approaching the entanglements of religion and both formal and informal politics is through Gifford’s (2015) recent distinction between NGO-ised and enchanted religion. Although these two planes of religion are distinguishable, they are also intertwined, and exist comfortably alongside each other in Ugandan public culture. In our analysis of the role of religion in Uganda’s 2016 elections, Jimmy Spire Ssentongo and I suggested (2016) that ‘religious beliefs, and religious leaders’ attempts to perpetuate particular beliefs among their followers, can both expand and diminish the space for public debate’, a space which, we argued, acts as a safeguard against the excesses of state power. The question we sought to answer was how these two planes of religion provided a ‘source of vitality for recovering “the political proper”’ (Cochrane 2010, 176) at the time of the elections. We argued that the ideal political proper implied a space for debate by multiple voices, employing multiple rationalities and languages, what Gardiner (ibid.) has called a wild public. A similar view is presented by Harri Englund (2011b), who argues that theories supported by modernization theory’s assumptions of secularization, such as the original Habermasian understanding of a secular public sphere, are profoundly inadequate for analyzing social reality in much of the world. Pointing out the impasses related to the use of the terms ‘politics’ and ‘religion’ in many studies on Africa, Englund (2011b) suggests replacing ‘politics’ with ‘publics’ in the Michael Warnerian (2002) sense. One of the rationales for doing so is Englund’s suspicion that much of the literature on religion as ‘resistance’ to the subjugating power of colonialism or the postcolonial state in Africa may have been inscribed onto ethnographic or historical evidence, due to scholars’ ‘left-liberal leanings’.

As fruitful a source of inspiration as the articles in Englund’s edited ‘Christianity and Public Culture’ (Englund 2011a) have been for studies in the field, their application of Warner’s theorising is somewhat peculiar. In various parts of his work (e.g. 2002, 52–53), Warner seems to suggest that so-called ‘pre-given frameworks’ – among them religion – by their nature oppose the kind of freedom-bringing modern public which he imagines and propounds. His proposition seems to be that an outwardly organised structure, such as the Catholic Church, or the (postcolonial) nation state, cannot create a true ‘sense of belonging and activity’. Rather, this is only possible in conjunction with a particular kind of secular post-modern individuality and its concomitant freedom. In recent years, debates on post-secularism, particularly in the context of postcolonial studies, have applied weighty critique to such views (see for instance Abu-Lughod 2013; Hirschkind 2006; Mahmood 2006; C. Taylor 2007).
For Warner, however, the modern individual and modern society are distinctly different from their pre-modern alternatives:

Our willingness to process a passing appeal determines which publics we belong to and performs their extension. The experience of social reality at this level of modernity feels quite unlike that of contexts organized by kinship, hereditary status, local affiliation, mediated political access, parochial nativity, or ritual. In those settings, one’s place in the common order is what it is regardless of one’s inner thoughts, however intense their affective charge might sometimes be. The apppellative energy of publics puts a different burden on us: it makes us believe our consciousness to be decisive. The direction of our glance can constitute our social world. (Warner 2002, 62)

In this study, I reject the view that peoples’ lifeworlds can be described as entirely dis-attached from, and unorganized by, ‘kinship, hereditary status, local affiliation, mediated political access, parochial nativity or ritual’ (ibid.), even in so-called modern societies; nor do I agree that in contexts organized by kinship to the extent that they are in Kitgum, for instance, ‘one’s place in the common order is organized regardless of one’s inner thoughts’ (ibid.). Such a dichotomous view seems rather useless for understanding social reality. For most people I encountered in Kitgum – probably for most people, anywhere – the direction of a glance cannot in itself constitute a social world. Rather, it is between the imaginaries of social worlds conjured by alternative directions for glances, and the strictures of familial, social, political, economic, material, and religious realities, that the social world is negotiated, imagined, and produced. So also in post-conflict Kitgum.

**Narrative imagination and political narratives**

In searching for a fruitful way in which to conceptualize the role of the church in post-war society and in politics, I have found inspiration in thinking about religion, about politics, and simply about how we make sense of the world and our place in it, through notions of story-telling and narrative. These concepts enabling pushing the conceptualisation of politics beyond the rather narrower understanding of it as involving the negotiations over legitimate public authority between institutions (Lund 2006), towards what Schatzberg (2001) describes as the ‘politically subjacent arena ... [which] contains those pre-theoretical notions and assumptions which, while not predicting or determining our political thoughts or behaviour, nevertheless tend to structure them within a range of politically thinkable possibilities’ (ibid., 31).

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10 For similar reflections from research on Indian communities in South Africa, see for instance Hansen, who writes that ‘[l]he “Indian public” is neither the ideal “self-organized relationship among strangers” nor the “counterpublic” that is defined in opposition to a mainstream evoked by Michael Warner. South African publics are without exception shaped by a century of institutionalised regulation of bodies, languages, dispositions, taste, and desires.’ (2012, 85)
The heart of the approach to analysis of my material can be summed up in Molly Andrews’ words. Writing of the centrality of imagination and storytelling to politics, she observes:

[T]here appears to be a general agreement that stories – both personal and communal – are pivotal to the way in which politics operates, both in people’s minds (i.e. how they understand politics, and their place within and outside of the formal political sphere) as well as how politics is practiced ... These stories, as it were, are not just within the domain of the individual, but are built upon the collective memory of a group, just as they help to create how that memory is mobilised and for what purposes. And critically, narratives are central to the machination of politics, for in constructing the stories about what is and isn’t working, and how this compares to a notion of ‘how it should be’ we are invariably deciding what aspects of social / political / economic / cultural life are and are not relevant to the current problem and its solution – in other words, the lifeblood of politics. Thus, political narratives engage the imagination, not only in constructing stories about the past and the present, but in helping to articulate a vision of an alternative world. (Andrews 2014, 86–87)

Andrew’s work is representative of the narrative turn in the humanities and social sciences, whereby narratives have come to be seen as fundamental to the way in which human beings make sense of themselves and the world (MacIntyre 1982; Nussbaum 1998; Ricoeur 1992), and valued as illuminating windows onto processes of social change. Within these broad debates, and due to the particular social context I study – one dramatically affected by violence – I have found Hanna Meretoja’s (2014) analysis of the demise and subsequent return of storytelling and grand narratives in the post-Second World War era particularly insightful. Meretoja shows how the fragmentation of any notion of sense in the trenches, and the crisis of humanism exemplified in the horrors of Nazi death camps, led novels of this era, acutely so in France, to adopt anti-narrative forms.

Drawing inspiration from such novels, social theorists in the after-war decades took a critical stance on earlier views about self-reflective subjects, as well as on narrative representations of the world, arguing rather for the radical ‘incapacity of the subject to constitute meaningful order into reality’ (Meretoja 2014, 15). Narrative representations of reality were critiqued in particular for what was seen as their tendency to force order upon a fragmented, irrational, and senseless reality. As Meretoja (2014) notes, the sharpest edge of this critique was aimed at ‘narratives that function in the mode of myths, presenting a certain meaningful order as natural and necessary’ (ibid. 17) – a critique that is also commonly put forward in arguments against religion and, more specifically, against Christian biblical narratives of suffering and redemption.

The Western, post-Second World War disillusionment with storytelling was followed, however, by a hermeneutic revival in both literature and theory, which
rejected the ‘dichotomous opposition between human experience and its narrative interpretation’ (Meretoja 2014, 18). In this turn, exemplified, for example, by Paul Ricoeur and Charles Taylor, narrative activity is seen as ‘a creative, constructive and selective activity of foregrounding and connecting certain aspects of experiences and events while ignoring others; it is a process of producing meaningful order through reinterpretation, which does not necessarily have to be a matter of imposition’ (ibid., 19, emphasis in original, see also Gubrium and Holstein (2008, 244)). Narrative in this view is seen as always embedded within certain cultural, social, and historical contexts, and hence, within relations of power, which individuals may inadvertently perpetuate through their own narrative interpretations (Meretoja 2014, 7).

This study’s analysis emphasises, however, that narratives are not only embedded in abstract relations of power, but in material and embodied reality which cannot be entirely grasped, or conveyed to another human being, in or through language. An acknowledgement of embodiment and materiality on the one hand, and of narratives as fundamentally important in making sense of experience, underlines the usefulness of an ethnographic approach which is sensitive not only to stories, but also to unverbalised and un narrated aspects of human experience. Such a view, as I will elaborate further in Chapter Five, foregrounds ‘the researcher’s own participation, perspective, voice, and especially... his or her emotional experience in relation to the experiences of those being studied’ (Gubrium and Holstein 2008, 244).

Ontologies of peace and violence – and the difference they make

The above discussion outlined the significance of stories to politics, but it also indicated the more profound significance of stories for social reality and our interpretations of it. As Meretoja (2014) points out, the violent experiences of the senselessness of war led post-structural social theorists to emphasise violence and fragmentation in their analyses of society. The stories they told (in their theory and analyses) were stories embedded in particular understandings about the nature of being.

In his analysis of the relationship between anthropology and theology, Joel Robbins (2006) has argued that theology succeeds ‘painfully easily’ in constituting belief in the possibility of meaningful otherness: a meaningful other way of living. Referring to the theologian Milbank (2006), who contrasts the ‘ontology of peace’ embedded in Christianity with what he defines as the secular, nihilist ‘ontology of violence’ that underlies the social sciences, Robbins argues:

[T]oday anthropology is not a discipline much given to finding radical otherness in the world or to using that otherness as a basis for hope. Our initial buy-in to the ontology of struggle and conflict was, it is true, to a version that highlighted the rather hopeful notion of resistance. But as that notion itself proved naïve (it certainly did nothing to denaturalize the ontology of violence), we have more and more resigned ourselves simply to serving as witnesses to the horror of the world,
the pathos of our work uncut by the provision of real ontological alternatives. The tropics as we portray them, wherever they happen to be, have never been so triste and devoid of ontological otherness as they are now. (Robbins 2006, 292)

Without grounding their work in a ‘Christian mythos’ as Milbank does, Robbins suggests that anthropologists should draw from Milbank’s work an inspiration to seek ‘real ontological otherness’ in the world through ethnographic studies of people and the ontologies by which they live their lives. In his later, much-debated essay on ‘the anthropology of the good’ (Robbins 2013), he develops the idea further, albeit no longer with reference to Milbank’s theology. Outlining the history of anthropology as a discipline, Robbins argues that critique of ‘othering’ discourses in the field, which aped in Trouillot’s seminal essay on ‘Anthropology and the Savage Slot’ (2003a) has increasingly encouraged anthropologists to shift their informants from the slot of ‘the other’ to that of the ‘suffering subject’. This suffering slot anthropology, as Robbins calls it, takes the form of scholarship engaged in activism as well as more hermeneutic research that focuses on interpreting experiences of violence, suffering, and abjection. Simply put, Robbins claims that when scholars in the social sciences, including anthropology, believe the essence of society to be about power, struggle, and violence, it is power, struggle, violence, and suffering which we identify in the places we study. The question then becomes one of what we would see if our gaze were directed by ontologies of peace, rather than of violence.

While Milbank’s work has provoked little debate in anthropology beyond Robbins’ 2006 article, the questions he raises have been vigorously discussed in recent Anglo-American theology, where Milbank’s seminal ‘Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason’ (2006) launched a school of thought known as Radical Orthodoxy. Milbank, and many following him, postulate that contemporary social theory and (Western) politics are premised on fundamentally atheist, materialist, and nihilist worldviews. In contrast, Christianity is seen to embody an ontology of peace, grounding interpretations of the world in belief in a transcendent, ultimate good: God, who gives life and provides an other-worldly goal towards which all life may aspire (Kemppainen 2016). For Radical Orthodox thinkers, an ontology stripped of the transcendent is an ontology of violence,11 which fails in attempts to comprehend the world because it so fundamentally misunderstands it. Moreover, it has profound consequences for the world because metaphysical assumptions about the nature of reality and human existence direct political action; they do not define it, but they may enable or pre-empt particular modes of action (Kemppainen 2016, 122). An ontology of violence is, in Kemppainen’s words, ‘incapable even of imagining the possibility of peace ... violence is always fundamental and unavoidable’ (Kemppainen 2016, 123

11 Christian philosophers have also come to the opposite conclusion. Vattimo (1999), for instance, in his interpretation of the nihilism of Heidegger and Nietzsche argues that Christian transcendentalism is often precisely the tool of violence.
Milbank thus argues for theology as the ultimate lens through which social reality should be interpreted, and for Christianity as the normative ground upon which social reality should be constructed.

Among the many theologians who have developed Milbank’s original arguments further, the one most relevant for my own interpretations of Christianity and politics in northern Uganda has been that of Ugandan Catholic theologian Emmanuel Katongole (2011). In his book, ‘The Sacrifice of Africa’, Katongole distinguishes between three perspectives adopted by churches regarding their role vis-à-vis politics: those emphasising the impact of individual spiritual transformation on the broader social realm; those emphasising churches’ pastoral role in community service; and those emphasising the prophetic calling of churches to promote the good of society. For Katongole, all these views are premised on the faulty Western assumption of religion and politics as distinct realms – a critique to which, as I mentioned before, many anthropologists would subscribe. Katongole laments that, when understood in these terms, Christianity fails to be identified in its true nature, as a genuine alternative to those undergirding contemporary African societies (ibid., 50). The visions of the church as pastoral, spiritual, and prophetic resemble the general humanistic social ethical approach to problems of African ‘under-development’ in that they are largely prescriptive. Even in their most ‘political’ form, they only add up to methods for improving politics and the nation state, when what is needed, Katongole argues, is a fundamental rethinking about what actually constitutes politics: suggesting a Christian, peaceful ontology in place of the violent ontology of colonial and postcolonial state-building.

Building on Milbank’s work, and distinctly similar to that of theoreticians of narrative politics like Mary Andrews (2014), Katongole suggests seeing ‘politics as dramatic performance grounded in a particular story that requires, and in the end shapes, particular characters’ (2011, 3). From this perspective, Katongole calls for re-conceptualising Christianity as ‘a form of politics, a unique performance grounded in a different set of stories that shape unique expectations and characters’ (ibid.). Katongole can be seen as representing what narrative scholars refer to as a strong narrativist position, one which ‘claims that ... action is presupposed by narrative and the self constituted by narratives’ (Farquhar 2010, 30), and which thus holds that certain kinds of narratives can have a transformative effect (Meretoja 2014, 215). From this perspective, Katongole argues that as long as churches use the language of worldly structures – such as the state – to critique these structures, the church cannot but reproduce those narratives and the structures they construct. Instead, Katongole argues for a radical new vision of the church, one in which Christ and Christianity is the story, rather than a mere commentary on other stories. This is, as I describe in detail shortly, very similar to the view taken by those anthropologists of hope who distance themselves from post-constructivist critique, claiming that it is ultimately self-defeating, choosing instead the replication of hope through their ethnographic
practice as a more powerful tool for political transformation (Kleist and Jansen 2016, 379).

To illustrate his argument, Katongole introduces situations in which what he sees as a Christian ontology of peace has replaced ontologies of violence in lived experience. Among these are examples from northern Uganda and South Sudan where Christians have responded to violent realities of war through the building of communities of peace and mutual care. But as evocative and touching as Katongole’s examples are, his theoretical construction begs the question: what would the expansion of a radically Christian peace ontology to a broader societal level actually imply? Numerous responses to this might be suggested, but here I limit myself to discussing the question from two perspectives: first, in light of Warner’s ideas on publics; and second, in light of discussions of the relationship between ontologies and action.

First, as discussed earlier, Warner highlights that all narrative activity is obliged to situate itself in relation to the pre-existing narrative framings of the public(s) it wishes to address. What Warner argues is that ‘when any public is taken to be the public, [its limitations] invisibly order the political world’ (2002, 77). A Warnerian reading of Katongole might thus suggest that taking the Christian public as the public would not wrench it free of the inevitable limitations that any public has: even if what Katongole envisions as an empowering, liberating, and emancipating Christianity were to replace other forms of narrative politics, the speech genres, medium, and presupposed social base of Christianity would then order the political world. Many postcolonial feminist theologians would certainly argue that Christianity does not demand an authoritarian closing off of other ways of living. Yet, as Kemppainen notes, for the Radical Orthodox proponents of a Christian ontology of peace, that peace is very specifically tied to faith in one particular God, and the transformation of society from one based on secularism or religious diversity to one based on Christianity is taken as a normative goal. The practical applications that arise from ontological commitments are, however, far from clear-cut. Almost identical ontological premises may be used to justify highly contradictory political positions (Kemppainen 2016). Furthermore, as I show in my analysis of the influence of Catholic teaching on the family and sexuality in northern Uganda (Alava 2017b) and in my analysis of utopian narratives of peace in Chapter Eight of this thesis, apparently peaceful narratives of inclusion may in fact translate into violent practices of exclusion.

A second question relates to the actual relevance of ontologies to actions. Here it must be clarified what it is I speak of when discussing ontology. As David Graeber (2015) notes, the radical ontological turn in anthropology, exemplified for instance by de Castro (2015) and Henare et. al. (2006), has in fact ripped the notion of ‘ontology’ away from its original usage. In philosophical debates ontology referred not as much to ‘being’, but ‘instead to a discourse (logos) about the nature of being’ (Graeber 2015, 15). This usage is notably different from that applied by anthropologists of the
ontological turn for whom, Graeber argues, accepting ‘multiple ontologies’ implies not only that people have ‘different beliefs about, or perceptions of, a single shared world, but [that] people ... literally inhabit different worlds’ (ibid., 18). Joel Robbins’s propositions for an ‘anthropology of the good’ (2013), and his call for recognition of multiple ontologies (2006), which I draw on for my analysis, resonate far more with ontology in the sense implied by philosophers and theologians than with scholars of the ‘ontological turn’ in anthropology.

That said, the arguments Graeber (2013) makes against this turn in anthropology are useful in assessing the relevance of ‘ontologies’ (Milbank), ‘founding stories’ (Katongole), or ‘political imaginaries’ (Andrews) for social reality. For Graeber, questions of the fundamental nature of reality are less important than the processes by which value orders are naturalized or destabilized through particular narratives. He argues that the making of ontological statements can be read as ‘political moves’ (2013, 232), and the processes of their naturalization as political projects (2013, 237). For Graeber, it is the naturalization of certain discourses about the order of reality that makes for an important object of analysis, rather than debates about the ‘true’ nature of reality as such (2013, 229). Interestingly then, Graeber’s value-driven critique of ontological radicalism in anthropology, and his activist, normatively anarchist, scholarly commitment to unpacking the narratives that are employed to naturalise political orders in contemporary society, are in some ways strikingly close to the approaches of the theological ontologists I have discussed above.12

In sum, the view I follow is that while stories, which can either frame the world as a place of conflict, strife, and suffering, or as the abode (also) of forgiveness, hope, and ‘the good’, are not irrelevant, they should not be given all-explanatory power when analysing social reality. I thus advocate a middle ground: political narratives (to use Andrews’ term), or ontologies (to use Milbanks’ and Katongole’s term) do not condition modes of action, but by moulding what is thought to be possible and worth pursuing, they may enable or delimit them (cf. Kemppainen 2016). The relevant point to take from the above discussion of the varying uses of ‘ontology’ in theology and anthropology is that whether ontologies (in the sense implied by the theologians) or narrative imaginaries (in the sense implied by scholars like Molly Andrews) provide absolute scripts for social existence, or whether they are contrived post-script to make sense of and justify political orders, they are relevant objects for anthropological, social scientific, and political analysis. Thus they are worthy of studying: not as objectified ‘stuff’ mobilised for explanation in the sense critiqued by Latour (2005), but ethnographically, with an eye to what is done, and an ear to the stories told about it.

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12 My thanks to Tuomas Tammisto for pointing out the resonance between the political ontologists and David Graeber’s work on value and ontology.
An anthropology of ‘the good’?

In a debate on the motion ‘there is no such thing as the good’, Veena Das and Hayder Al-Mohammad harshly criticize anthropology’s recent turn towards ‘the good’, a turn represented in the debate by Robbins and Stafford (Venkatesan 2015). Their arguments against ‘the good’ are made primarily in relation to recent anthropological debates on ethics and values. Robbins’ earlier work, particularly his 2006 article on the awkward relationship between anthropology and theology, highlights, however, that ‘the good’ is not solely related to questions of morality or ethics. What Robbins emphasizes in the debate is that the good need not be conflated with the right. Rather than questions of ethics per se, what is foregrounded by Robbins’ work in my reading, particularly in his reflections on Milbanks’ theology, are questions of ontology in the sense described above.

For Das, however, whose work on suffering I draw on in Chapter Five of this thesis, it is precisely this kind of turn to the philosophical that is highly problematic. Das claims it to imply a contempt for the everyday, with the turn to the good being ‘symptomatic of a certain tiredness of having to deal with the quotidian forms of suffering in anthropology (as, indeed, in popular culture, resonating in terms such as donor fatigue that circulate in the media)’ (Das in Venkatesan 2015, 433). If indeed an interest in ‘the good’ – in which category Robbins in his 2013 article loosely includes ‘studies of value, morality, imagination, well-being, empathy, care, the gift, hope, time and change’ (Robbins 2013, 456) – implied a fatigue or discomfort with suffering that was leading anthropologists to ignore it or disdain it, I would fully agree with Das’ critique. But while this may be true for individual scholars, it is not what I see Robbins advocating.

To make this point explicit, I draw on a similar one made by Mattingly (2010) in her ethnographic study of the lives of African American families with severely handicapped or terminally ill children. Mattingly argues that analysis drawing on the post-structuralist thought of Bourdieu and Foucault, which emphasises that practice is structured by the structural conditions that regulate everyday lives, is insufficient. Rather, adopting de Certeau’s (2011) focus on everyday strategies, Mattingly studies how hope is nourished, created, and cultivated in situations of extreme suffering:

Put in the bluntest terms: reality needs to be exposed as a space of possibility and not only of imprisonment or structural reproduction. Despite the immense power of oppressive social structures, reality is not summed up by their existence. It is not more real to disclose our imprisonment within everyday life than to disclose the possibilities for transformation that this life also admits. (Mattingly 2010, 39)

In a resonating vein, Robbins (2013) argues that emerging studies of ‘the good’ are not arising as critiques of so-called suffering slot anthropology, which Robbins sees as filling an important role in calling attention to the key social problems of our time,
but as complements to it. In the present study, it is this kind of complementarity towards which I strive. Hope and the things that disappoint it or foreclose it – fear, silence, suffering, and the historical and on-going structural and political constraints it cannot escape – appear in this study as I argue they do in everyday lives: as fluid, abiding beside each other, one uppermost at one moment and another at the next. Writing of hope and peace in the way I do is thus not an attempt to turn away from suffering, which, it is clear, has been and remains profound in the setting I study. To do so would, in my view, be unethical. But not to speak of hope would be likewise since, as Mattingly argues, structures of violence, however repressive, do not preclude the possibility of human striving towards better life, of the work of building and rekindling hope regardless of everything (Mattingly 2010).

That said, some of the critique Das levels at Robbins does seem to me justified, and begs attention here. Das’ critique of Robbins’ (2013) account of anthropology’s turn from ‘the other’ to the ‘suffering subject’ is grave, for Robbins narrates anthropological theory as having developed solely in the West, in the hands of Western scholars, and claims the foci of anthropological exploration emerged to address the cultural needs of the West (Das in Venkatesan 2015, 435–38). Yet I would argue that it is possible to adopt Robbins’ basic arguments – that anthropology has been largely devoid of ontological otherness (in the theological sense), and that anthropologists have in recent decades relegated many of their informants to the slot of suffering subjects – even while striving for more postcolonially aware accounts of suffering or hope than achieved in Robbins’ appraisal of anthropology’s past.

A few words are in order on these issues specifically in relation to research on northern Uganda, in which, as I have already argued, the ‘suffering slot’ identified by Robbins is very commonly evoked. Sverker Finnström has systematically written against a disempowering narrative of suffering when addressing how the Acholi struggle to make sense of, and existentially, cosmologically, and morally navigate, the difficult circumstances the war inflicted. Similarly, Holly Porter’s account of how individuals and communities come to terms with sexual violence underlines the ways in which people pragmatically, spiritually, and emotionally come to terms with, and live beyond, their experiences of suffering.

Yet, despite the nuance in these and other accounts, I have the sense that, as a whole, the body of literature on northern Uganda produced by local and international scholars has placed the Acholi people into precisely the kind of ‘suffering slot’ that Robbins describes. It is hard to ‘prove’ this exactly, but it is a sense that has accrued over years of interactions with Ugandan and ‘Western’ scholars working both in the northern and other parts of Uganda; through reading piles of literature on the region; and through conducting research in the region myself. A search for ‘northern Uganda’ on Google Scholar gives some indication of where this sense originates: page after page of articles include words such as ‘war’, ‘suffering’, ‘orphans’, ‘abduction’, ‘terror’, ‘post-traumatic stress disorder’, or ‘violence’ in their title or key words. And the harsh
question is: how could they not? Not because this is all that northern Uganda is, but because researchers who choose northern Uganda as their site of research rarely, if ever, do so because of their desire to understand the beauty of Acholi customary dances, music, or poetry, or to learn of the intricacies of Acholi family ties, religious thought, or agricultural practices. Rather, northern Uganda becomes the site of choice because it was the site of a terrible war.

While there is much in Acholi history to justify the fact that much research focuses on describing and analysing various forms of suffering, my suspicion is that relegating Acholi people to the slot of the suffering subject has also been, at least in part, a political move. It has been preferable to placing the Acholi into the slot of ‘the other’ – the savage – in which they were discursively placed throughout the northern Ugandan war. As Sverker Finnström has described, Museveni’s NRM (National Resistance Movement) government systematically fostered a narrative of the war in which Acholi people were demonised, infantilised, and ‘othered’ in order to justify the government’s fierce counterinsurgency tactics against Acholi civilians (Finnström 2008). Numerous prominent scholars, Finnström first among them, have drawn attention to the extent to which international development actors and media accounts bought into the NRM government’s narrative, and commentators familiar with the scholars’ work have taken the critique to heart.

The outcome of this recognition and critique of the violent othering of Acholi people, however, seems to have been the production of a new master narrative running parallel to the old: in place of the government’s discourse of the Acholi as the ultimate ‘other’, local and international academia, as well as religious leaders and other civil society actors, have created a narrative that essentialises Acholi people into a homogenous group – ‘the Acholi’ – and designates for this group the slot of the suffering subject. Yet ultimately, a discourse of suffering can serve to create distance and otherness in much the same way as does a discourse of savageness (Ahmed 2000). The apparent shift from one master narrative to another can thus hide significant continuities, as Jungar and Oinas note regarding discourses of victimhood and agency in AIDS research and activism (2011). What is also noteworthy is that the roles of villain and victim are not only ascribed by some to others, they are also roles that individuals, organisations and communities deliberately assume, often in order to evoke specific responses from others. In such a context (as I will discuss in further detail in Chapter Five), navigating the ethics of representation is no easy task.

In aiming to strike a balance of complementarity between the two positions espoused in the Das / Robbins debate – between an ethnography focusing on the good, and an ethnography focusing on suffering – I have found it useful to turn to Cooper and Pratten (2015) who suggest:

What emerges from ethnography that starts from or in uncertainty is an appreciation for ways of being, a posture that confronts the unpredictable ... [leading to] an emphasis on what we might call the making of the ‘subjunctive
subject’. We learn that uncertainty does not always lead to trepidation and anxiety, nor does it always lead to hope, though it may. (Cooper and Pratten 2015, 13)

As Susan Whyte has described, the ‘subjunctive mood’, which she witnessed among Ugandan AIDS patients, refers to a mood ‘of doubt, hope, will, and potential [which is not] a quality of life, or of particular persons, but a mood of action: a doubting, hoping, provisional, cautious, and testing disposition to action’ (Whyte 2005, 250–51). A focus on the subjunctive would also relate to this study’s focus on narrative imagination, for imagination itself is profoundly subjunctive in nature; that is, while embedded in circumstances that have already come into being, imagination deals not only with settled certainties, but with envisioned possibilities (Andrews 2014, 13; see also Bruner 1986, 26). It is thus to possibility and hope to which we now turn.

On hope

A particular variant of what Robbins’ characterizes as the anthropology of the good has been the research focusing on hope, which has emerged simultaneously with a far broader interest in hope across the social sciences (see for instance Bloch 1986; Crapanzano 2003; Browne 2005; Hage 2003; Zournazi 2002), and in partial resonance with parallel discussions around the theology of hope (see in particular Moltmann 2002). In a recent special issue on the anthropology of hope and futures, Jansen (2016) makes a useful conceptual distinction between the transitive and intransitive modalities of hope referenced in the growing body of anthropological literature on the subject.

In the intransitive sense, hope refers to an affect of hopefulness as opposed to hopelessness, hence often an affect seen by its nature as positive. In the transitive sense, hope orients towards an object or objects, as in hopes for something. Drawing on this conceptual distinction, Kleist and Jansen identify two prevalent streams in the anthropology of hope: first, studies that focus on locating hope against all the odds; and second, studies of what they refer to as the ‘political economy of hope’, whereby analysis seeks to unravel the ‘unequal social processes that produce and distribute temporal dispositions in a particular ... social constellation at a particular time’ (Kleist and Jansen 2016, 382). A crucial inspiration for this second debate has been Hage’s (2003) analysis of the unequal distribution of societal hope by the state, or, as Turner (2015) highlights, by other institutions such as churches which are involved in the distribution of societal hope. As these studies show, the distribution of hope is always fundamentally political, and functions as a form of governing.

The second body of scholarship that Kleist and Jansen (2016) identify is that focusing on hope amidst indeterminacy or hopelessness. One of the most important

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13 In grammar, the subjunctive mood refers to a verb form that expresses possibility, wishes, uncertainties, and suggestions.
studies in this category, and one from which I draw heavily in Chapter Eight, is that by Hirokazu Miyazaki. Drawing on philosopher Ernst Bloch’s magnum opus, ‘The Principle of Hope’ (1986), Miyazaki argues that hope cannot be seen as an outcome of preceding events, nor treated as an object of philosophical or social scientific inquiry, for to do so would render it void. In this view, the essence of hope is its orientation towards the future, and the task for the ethnographer is the replication of moments of hope in one’s ethnographic writing. The ‘method of hope’, as Miyazaki calls it, is thus essentially about creating a future-orientation and indeterminacy rather than the closure and backward-orientation typical of critical social scientific analysis (Miyazaki 2006, 127). Since Miyazaki’s work, numerous scholars have utilised the concept of indeterminacy and uncertainty in their analyses of violence, sickness, and precarity. For instance, Cooper and Pratten (2015) maintain that uncertainty is productive of ‘new social landscapes and social horizons’ (ibid., 2).

In their critical overview of anthropologies of hope, Kleist and Jansen (2016) call for restraint, both by those wishing to glorify or romanticise the positive aspects of uncertainty, and by those wishing to portray hope as always ‘positive’, or even benign. One part of Jansen’s (2016) detailed critique is also relevant to the discussion about ‘grounding ontologies’ and their effects that I touched upon above - in particular, my Michael Warner-inspired critique of founding narratives that come to determine the limits of the polity. That is, Jansen notes that scholarship highlighting indeterminacy as a prerequisite of hope (such as the work of Miyazaki), tends to ignore that for Bloch, the promise of the indeterminacy of the present lay in its providing the opportunity for the emergence of Communism. For Bloch, indeterminacy was ultimately not boundless, but a prelude to a clearly determined political endpoint.

Similar selectivity also characterizes studies of hope in other ways. Kleist and Jansen argue that studies of both hope and of ‘the good’ tend to be characterised by a desire to identify hope, and to write in ways that rekindle it. Yet, as Jansen argues, an underpinning desire to rekindle something deemed ‘hopeful’ forecloses the recognition of hopes which the scholar does not wish to rekindle (Jansen 2016, 451–53). For this reason Kleist and Jansen advocate approaching ‘hope as an ethnographic category in critical analysis rather than a normative banner in manifestos of optimism’ (2016, 373–74). A critical analysis of hope would shift the focus of scholarship:

What do different people hope for? How do they hope? How does this develop over time? As soon as we formulate questions in this manner, we realize that hope as an object of analysis is in principle ‘neutral’: people can cherish many different hopes and, unless we focus explicitly on like-minded people, only some of them will be in tune with any author’s own political hopes. (ibid. 380)

Kleist and Jansen’s demand for making hope an object of analysis takes a notable step away from much previous anthropological work on the topic, including Miyazaki’s which I described above. While Miyazaki (2006) argues that hope cannot be made an
object of analysis because hope’s forward-looking orientation can only be preserved when it is replicated or performed rather than represented, Jansen argues that ‘it is often difficult to distinguish in such writings between the transitively understood hopes of research subjects they document, those of the anthropologists who study them, and an intransitively understood affect of hopefulness’ (Jansen 2016, 451).

Despite acknowledging the validity of Jansen’s caution, I would like to suggest that it is not necessary to see ‘advocating hope’ and ‘analysing hope’ as mutually exclusive alternatives. Jansen claims that scholars who believe in replicating hope emphasise indeterminacy in a way that compels them to take hope out of its history so as to prevent its capture, whereas non-replicatory analyses of the political economy of hope enable the understanding of the embeddedness of hope in particular histories. This critique seems to ignore that Miyazaki’s work, for instance, looks specifically to the evolution and replication of hopes throughout particular histories and ultimately also through ethnographic writing. Indeed, while Kleist and Jansen’s distinction between two broad bodies of scholarship on hope, ‘the replicatory’ and the ‘non-replicatory’, is to some extent useful as a classificatory tool, I suggest the distinction creates an unnecessarily strict opposition between hope as an object of analysis, and commitment to a replication of hope as a scholarly disposition.

In conclusion, I argue that it is possible to combine critical analysis of hope – its distribution and its transformation through time – with a normative commitment to balancing ontological presuppositions of suffering with those of ‘the good’ by way of the replication of hope in both its intransitive and transitive senses.

While many of the chapters in this thesis do not speak directly to the broad theoretical debates outlined in these theoretical orientations, the thesis as a whole undertakes an analysis of hope – its distribution and its rises and falls – in post-war northern Uganda, and a replication of the hopes for peace expressed by my informants.

**Transgressing boundaries in pursuit of complexity**

Lauterbach’s (2013) suggestion that religious positionality be thought of in terms of a chameleon (see Chapter One) is also useful for thinking about disciplinary positionality. Employing the ethnographic practice that Cerwonka refers to as ‘tacking’, that is, using ‘theory and ethnographic material to think one through the other’ (2007, 19), has led me across numerous disciplinary boundaries in the process of this work and in the coming chapters: from ‘mainstream’ Development Studies to anthropology, sociology, political psychology, and theology; changing colour, analytical angle and conceptual lens as I go, somewhat like a chameleon. A chameleon meandering along, through paths well trodden and ones defined by desire (Ahmed 2006). Being based in the multidisciplinary field of Development Studies as it has been practised at my University, I have been provided ample freedom to do so. The
freedom to transgress boundaries (for one vital source of inspiration, see hooks 1994), is also whence I have drawn the greatest analytical insights in the process of this work.

Practicing this freedom to transgress is also what has clarified my desire for this study as a whole to stand as a critical response to increasing demands for the immediate policy-relevance of Development Studies and social scientific research in general. In place of what I claim is the illusion of solidity in calls for ‘policy-relevant knowledge’, this study proposes anyobanyoba, confusion, as an epistemologically fruitful and ethically sound attitude to social research, particularly in places characterised by violent conflict. Yet, as I hope this thesis as a whole shows, and as I will argue in its conclusion in Chapter Ten, for the researcher to acknowledge confusion does not equate with being hopelessly confused. Bompani has argued that a ‘focused transdisciplinary approach ... allows research to navigate complexity and engage with issues while constantly reminding us of the origins of the investigative process in which the study is conducted’ (Bompani 2014, 312). In my case, this has meant developing an approach to understanding the societal role of religion in a post-war context that, while rooted in anthropology, applies carefully selected conceptual tools from other disciplines – political science, political theology, and narrative studies – to the analysis. Furthermore, rather than seeking to provide an exhaustive explanation of post-war ‘confusion’, or clear-cut explanation of the impact of mainline Christianity in the studied context, the approach I have developed has specifically sought to create space for analysis that accommodates complexity in a way that provokes further questions rather than clear-cut answers. As I will return to discuss in Chapter Ten, the approach I have adopted resonates in parts (albeit with vital differences, see Chapter Ten) with calls for postcritical social science, which is ‘based on a pragmatic and experimental engagement with each new situation as it arises’ (Jensen 2014, 361), and which accedes the inability of any theory or method to grant more than provisional grounds for action in the social world (ibid.).

A key inspiration for my developing this approach has been the question posed by French antinarrativists of the post-war era, that being: are narratives violent impositions of order onto what actually is a chaotic reality? In fact, Meretoja’s analysis of one French novel in this genre reads to me as a description of the kind of scholarship to which I aspire:

The experience of non-understanding, of encountering the strange, recalcitrant nature of things, can be not only a humiliating, desperate experience of powerlessness but also an ethical stance of humility and honesty – of acknowledging that one is not the master of the universe and that one’s capacity to understand is profoundly limited. This does not pertain only to the soldier’s experience of disorientation, but also to the novel as a textual labyrinth that gives rise to the reader’s disorientation and bafflement. Neither the world to the soldier nor the text to the reader is given as a readily consumable meaningful order. Through the text’s unsettling ambiguity the reader is prompted to live
through the bewildering and potentially ethical experience of not knowing.
(Meretoja 2014, 90)

As a young scholar aspiring to receive an academic degree, I dare not aspire to writing an unsettlingly ambiguous thesis (although as Halberstam (2011, 6) suggests, aspiring for research to be taken seriously might be precisely what pre-empts visionary insight); neither is it my understanding that the Acholi lifeworlds I have attempted to study should be described as utterly disoriented and baffled. But I do prompt the reader to experience what I myself have experienced in my fieldwork and its aftermath: a condition of not knowing, and an acceptance of confusion and bafflement which, I argue throughout this thesis, provides an ethical stance for anyone wishing to engage with human reality - whether in post-conflict northern Uganda, or anywhere. Indeed, such an epistemological stance, emphasizing hesitation and interpretation over knowledge and resolution, suggests what Meretoja calls an ‘ethics of uncertainty’ (2014, 213). It also resonates deeply with the antinarrativist arguments of the post-Second World War era, which were grounded in a view of the world as one which ‘lacks pre-given meaningful order and hence requires us to participate in its making, in constructing our own order, which is necessarily relative, provisional, always to be questioned and remade’ (ibid.,118).

My personal rather relative and provisional epistemology is certainly oddly juxtaposed with the doctrinal epistemology of the churches I studied. But it is very compatible with the sense of disorientation and confusion that characterized the post-war era in northern Uganda: with an inability to explain the past, an uncertainty in interpreting the present, and a mixture of hesitant expectation, fear, and hope concerning the future. Rather than adopting a strict ontology of confusion and violence, the hermeneutic narrative perspective that Meretoja suggests holds that it is through storytelling and narrative that human beings, as individuals and as communities, seek to grapple with disorientation and non-comprehension. What thus emerges as a key focus of this study is the dynamic mediation of confusion and hope: on one hand, the uncertainty and ambivalence of post-war reality, and on the other, the endeavours of my Acholi informants to deal with that reality in ways that enable co-inhabiting the world.

The complexity, ambiguity, and unfinished and perpetually evolving nature of social reality, and of the attempts made to produce knowledge of those realities, is the very stuff that ethnography is so well-suited to accede to and explore. In this study, I have attempted to give this complexity the attention it is due: rather than cleaning out the ambiguity and complexity I encountered in the field from the final written account so as to provide more clear-cut answers to the questions it posed, I have chosen to explore it, and seek ways to reproduce it in my writing. This is the challenge I also hope this study can offer its academic field.
Chapter 3

The gun and the word
Missionary-colonial history in Kitgum

The fastest way to drive to Kitgum from Gulu is by way of the shortcut that branches from the main road at Atanga parish, a route that has the benefit of providing a scenic view of Pandwong hill which marks the town.\(^5\) Driving into Kitgum with my family in 2012 I recognised the hotel I had stayed at for three weeks in 2006, yet my mental map of the small town had grown blurry, and I advised my husband to take what proved to be a wrong turn. We stopped the car and I asked a lady at a market stall: ‘Mission tye kwene?’ Alongside everyday greetings, this question – ‘Where is mission?’ – was just about all the Acholi I could muster at that point. But it sufficed, and we were directed to the Catholic mission station, which in Kitgum is simply known as ‘the Mission’, whereas the area around the old Protestant mission is referred to by the Acholianised name Mican.

While churches and smaller chapels are well-known landmarks throughout northern Uganda, the marks of missionary-colonial history go beyond the visible plane. This chapter answers the question ‘Mission tye kwene?’ by tracing some of the ways in which a century of missionary Christianity marks the material, social, political, and cosmological landscape of present-day Kitgum. By highlighting selected aspects of the history of missionary and colonial expansion in Acholiland, I provide a contextualising framework for advancing this study’s overall aim to understand how churches, as materially, socially, politically, and cosmologically embedded institutions and communities, provide their members with resources, and function as arenas, for narrative imagination.

After a brief overview of the first phases of colonial and missionary work in Acholiland, I analyse three central aspects of what I call the embeddedness of churches. First, I describe the process through which central concepts of Christianity were translated into Acholi, and suggest that not only did missionary work introduce a new religion, its work of translation also had bearing on what is currently conceptualised as ‘customary’ clan practice – a process I suggest resulted in a complex cosmological embedding of the church in contemporary Acholi society. Second, I assess the relationships between missionaries, colonialists, and Acholi chiefs, as well as

\(^5\) Pandwong is a flat-topped inselberg which rises approximately 90 metres above the surrounding plateau, which continues in all directions around Kitgum town, lying an average 1,000 meters above sea level (Ocitti 1966). The elevation of Kitgum is greater than that of Gulu and the climate notably hotter and drier. In the 2014 Census, the population of the Town Council area was put at 44,604, down by over 8,000 people from the high point of the war.
between the rival missions of the Catholic Verona missionaries\textsuperscript{15} and the Protestant Church Missionary Society (CMS), suggesting that the dynamics of collaboration and competition which emerged in these early years continue to have bearing today by virtue of their political embeddedness. Third, I describe the growth of Kitgum town and its two missions and the tensions this has produced in the communities surrounding the missions, illustrating the social and material embeddedness of historical churches in the present. What is noteworthy is that the distinction I make in this chapter is more analytical than empirical, in that the ‘cosmological’, ‘social’, ‘material’ and ‘political’ were intricately interwoven in pre-missionary Acholiland: as Kallinen notes, despite attempts made to separate ‘religion’ from ‘politics’ through the missionary and colonial encounter, their boundaries remain vague also in the present (Kallinen 2014). To close the chapter, I interpret what has become a landmark event during the early years of missionary work in the region, that is, the death of two Acholi catechists in Paimol in the early 1900s. Contrasting my own reading of the two martyr’s deaths with popular interpretations of the event in contemporary Acholi Catholicism, I analyse its commemoration in 2012 as an instance of narrative imagination.

Drawing inspiration from research on how African cultures and societies have resisted and adapted to colonization (Cole 2001; J. Comaroff and Comaroff 1991; J. L. Comaroff and Comaroff 1997; Kallinen 2014), in this chapter I highlight the complexities of the processes of negotiation – between missionaries, chiefs, administrators, politicians, and the thousands of Acholi with whom missionaries have interacted – through which missionary churches have become embedded in Acholi society. As I argue through my reading of the commemoration of the Paimol martyrs, the outcomes of these negotiations have largely become naturalised in the eyes of many Catholic and Protestant adherents in Acholiland today; the political contexts and the racial undertones of the initial decades of missionary encounter in Acholiland have mostly been erased, and are rarely mentioned within core church circles (see Cole 2001 for a comparable example of colonial amnesia). Indeed, my own critical reading of colonial-missionary history is one I hardly ever encountered in the churches I studied. In present-day Kitgum town, the churches to which active Protestants and Catholics belong, despite being introduced by English, Italian, and Austrian missionaries, are by and large not seen as foreign impositions, but as something complexly part and parcel of Acholiland and Acholi lives – as embedded and owned.

\textsuperscript{15} The Verona missionaries comprised priests, nuns, and lay monks. As is the practice in Kitgum, I commonly refer to these as Fathers, Sisters, and Brothers. In the 1970s the Mission officially adopted the name of its founder Daniel Comboni, since when the missionaries have been referred to as Comboni rather than Verona missionaries. In this thesis I follow the same practice; referring to Catholic missionaries in the present and in recent decades as Combonis, and as Verona missionaries at earlier phases.
Establishing ‘good luck’ and order among the Acholi people

In August 1912, colonial officer J.R.P. Postlethwaite arrived at Pandwong hilltop, bringing with him forty Nubian askaris and plans for the pacification of the Eastern Acholi people and the development of a modern town, as well as the name of an earlier site at which his troops had attempted to establish the new district capital of Eastern Acholiland: kit gūm, or ‘good luck’ (Ocitti 1966, 39). The new town’s administrative centre was positioned on the northern flank of the hill, in the favourable bend the small Pager River makes as it skirts the hilltop.\(^\text{16}\) The hill and the river combined to provide a defendable location in case of attack, a consideration likely to have been a priority for Postlethwaite as the Acholi had proven difficult to convince of the necessity and advantageousness of succumbing to colonial rule (Dwyer 1972; Postlethwaite 1947).

The first attempt to establish British colonial dominion over what was to become the Acholi region had ended in disappointment 1907 when the colonial base run together with the CMS mission station in Patiko was moved after it had been essentially isolated and cut off from supplies and workforce by the local chief’s creation of a ‘no-man’s-land’ around the white men. A year later, the CMS station also withdrew, leaving behind a handful of converts shunned by their community.\(^\text{17}\) This turn of events came as a serious disappointment to the CMS, which had initially been invited to Acholiland by the most powerful of Acholi chiefs at that point, Rwot (Chief) Awich of the Payira clan.\(^\text{18}\) The CMS missionaries had written spirited and enthusiastic accounts of these first trips (Cook 1904; Lloyd 1904; Kitching 1904), although, as it turned out, high expectations turned to disappointment. Whereas CMS missionaries insisted they were being invited to Acholi due to the chiefs’ desire to abandon their old ways and find ‘good food that shall strengthen [their] souls’ (Prouet 1978, 150), Acholi elders later recalled Awich’s primary interest as having been in the ability of missionaries to read and write (ibid.). Lloyd, one of the first optimists to arrive in the region some years earlier, described their departure from Patiko in the following way:

[T]he last few weeks in Patigo will ever live in our memories. The people hearing we were off, hung round us like vultures, waiting for the little bits of rubbish we might throw aside while packing our odds and ends. Of course, as we expected,

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\(^\text{16}\) The Pager is a small river that shrinks in the dry season so that it can be waded or walked across.

\(^\text{17}\) Although Cisternino claims that the mission and the colonial base were shut down simultaneously in 1907 (Cisternino 2004, 374), Wright pinpoints the mission withdrawal to 1909 (Wright 1919, 134).

\(^\text{18}\) Many of the Payira continue to hold their chief as the paramount chief of all the Acholi, but the issue is highly disputed. Prior to the late 19th century, the Payira had been an influential chieftdom, but the office of paramount chief was formally installed only by the British colonialists in their attempt to make the Acholi more easily governable (Atkinson 2010, 266; Finnström 2008, 45; see Mamdani 1996 on ‘indirect rule’).
the Acoli refused point-blank to carry our loads to Uganda [Buganda], and we
were obliged to send off to Hoima and Masindi over a hundred miles away, for
Banyoro [the neighbouring people to the South of Acholiland] to come to our
help... A very few of the Acoli boys came to say good-bye... Only one soul from
among all who had called us friends accompanied us upon our way, and we
almost thought there was a sign of pleasure on the faces of some as we passed
from them in to the darkness...

During the withdrawal of the CMS and the British colonial government from
Acholiland, the first Roman Catholic Verona missionaries, whose religious order was
based on the vision of the Italian, Daniel Comboni, to spread the Gospel to the
source of the Nile, reached northern Uganda via what is now South Sudan. By the
time the CMS returned in the wake of the colonial government’s second attempt to
establish control in Acholiland, the Verona missionaries already had a strong presence
in the area. This second phase of British expansion to Acholiland culminated in the
establishment of Gulu town in 1910, in the face of opposition from Rwot Awich on
whose clan’s land the town was built.19 During this time, traditional clan chiefs all
over Acholiland were disposed of – imprisoned, publically humiliated, and some of
them killed – and replaced with new colonially-appointed ruodi kalam (chiefs of the
pen, as opposed to ruodi moo, anointed chiefs)20 as the Acholi called them. Among the
many grievances people had towards the new colonial district commissioners and their
henchmen, one of the sorest points of annoyance was the confiscation of Acholi
weapons (Karugire 118, 125).

Prior to the establishment of the British protectorate of Uganda, slave and ivory
traders from the Zanzibari coast and from Sudan had already been active in the
region. Eventually the Sudanese established numerous trade posts in Acholi territory,
where, after an initial phase of slave raiding among the Acholi, they increasingly
collaborated with the Acholi to raid neighbouring groups (Atkinson 2010, 267–72;
Girling 1960, 129–33). Similarly to what occurred later with the British colonialists,
interaction with the traders and administrators from Egyptian Sudan served to
trench divisions between Acholi chiefdoms and clans, enabling certain groups to
emerge as stronger than others (Dwyer 1972, 39–57). Unlike in the large kingdoms of
Central Uganda, the Acholi clans, which had settled in northern Uganda through
successive migrations over a long period of time, existed fairly independently of each
other, with no overaching hierarchic structure (Crazzolara 1950). Particularly in the
wake of the flow of small arms to the area, escalating intra-clan tensions broke out in

19 The Catholic missionary Crazzolara describes the establishment of Gulu thus: ‘On hearing the news,
the population is thoroughly shaken. They still have their grains in the fields, but orders are that they
must pick up cereals not for themselves but for Gulu town... The government has ordered to burn
down any house or village of those who have made remonstrations... I have seen burnt barns
everywhere.’ (Crazzolara’s diary, quoted in Cisternino 2004, 361).
20 Ruot is singular for chief, ruodi plural.
increasingly violent ways (Adimola 1954; Karugire 1980, 56–58). Having replaced the Sudanese slavers with their own, often rogue, Sudanese soldiers – and so as to establish effective control over Acholiland – the British argued, with missionary backing, that it was in the best interests of the Acholi that their guns be taken away.

In 1911, members of the Lamogi chieftdom, joined by malcontents from other chiefdoms, informed the British that they would neither surrender their arms nor bow to colonial rule, and stocked up a network of caves under the Guruguru hills in preparation for war. Resistance to colonial rule was widespread, and the Assistant District Commissioner in Gulu wrote to his supervisor at the beginning of the Lamogi rebellion: ‘This infection appears to be spreading... I consider that a final lesson should be given these people... they require to be brought to their senses in a very effectual way’ (quoted in Adimola 1954, 172). The British captain responsible for the siege of the hills that eventually followed, noted down the complaints shouted out by the fighters: ‘Our fathers carried your loads! We will never work for any Mzungu! We will fight till we kill one Mzungu! We don’t want peace!’ (cited in Cisternino 2004, 375). Colonialist forces eventually cut the supply lines and access to clean water of the soldiers in the Guruguru hills. Ninety-one Acholi warriors were killed, three hundred died of dysentery, and over a thousand Acholi were taken prisoner (Adimola 1954, 175). According to Cisternino (2004, 375), thirty-four Acholi traditional chiefs who had been sympathetic to the Lamogi resistance were permanently deported after the rebellion was quelled, and new chiefs were named by the British in their place.

The establishment of Kitgum town in late 1912, just six months after these events, thus broadened and strengthened the dominion of the British Empire over this part of Uganda – almost two decades after the initial establishment of the British Uganda company in (Central) Uganda in 1888, the subsequent Uganda protectorate in 1894, and the full-fledged colony in 1905. In the coming decades, the development of Kitgum followed the prescripts of modernisation: a cotton ginnery was established on the eastern side of town, and quarters for the civil servants and staff of the ginnery were built next to the town’s administrative centre (Ocitti 1966; for cotton production see also Karugire 1980, 130). While direct colonial governance, in the form of the district administration and a police force, was executed from the flanks of Pandwong hill, an integral part of the colonial civilising mission was deployed from the northern side of the Pager River, where mission stations were established by both CMS and

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21 It was during Arab trade, and later through the presence and intermarriage of Nubian soldiers in the greater northern Uganda (i.e., including West Nile), that Islam was introduced to the region (Gingyera-Pinyewa 1976, 16). Proselytism was never on the level of the Christian missions, however, and the number of Muslims in the Acholi region in 1959 was recorded at 1% (ibid.). In the 2002 and 2014 Censuses religious affiliation was no longer broken down at a district level.

22 For the sake of clarity, I do not differentiate in the text between these different phases of colonialism, also referring to the ‘colonial government’ when discussing events that occurred during the protectorate era.
Verona missionaries. I will return to the details of the expansion of the missions in Kitgum town after tracing a broader picture of the different streams of colonial / missionary encounter in Acholi, and the forms of embeddedness of the church to which they led.

Image 8. Illustration in CMS Gleaner article about the Society’s work in Acholiland (Wright 1919, 135). Reproduced with permission from CMS archives.
Cosmological embeddedness: Rubanga, Lubanga, and Jok

In an article published in the CMS Gleaner in 1919, Reverend Wright, a member of the society, reflected on the first years of missionary work in Acholiland with the following words:

The mass movement in the Gulu district is not to be likened to an earthquake, or a river in flood. Still, there is a beginning, the commencement of a landslide, or the flowing of a stream. The ground proved very hard and barren when work was begun among the nude, wild tribes in 1903. The people lived away in the bush and spent their time in hunting and feasting, without a desire for anything spiritual. (Wright 1919, 134)

Wright’s characterisation of the Acholi people with the Biblical metaphor of hard and barren ground was further emphasised by the caption under one of the photographs included in the article: ‘An old Acholi man. A hard nut to crack’ (Image 8). The notion that the Acholi were hard to ‘crack’, that is, to convert, appears repeatedly in missionary accounts from the early years, and is, interestingly, often still alluded to by both Protestant and Catholic priests today.23

In the historical narratives, two issues are raised to explain this matter, the first of which is succinctly phrased in CMS missionary Kitching’s observation that ‘independence [is] perhaps the most marked characteristic of the Acholi race’ (Kitching 1904, 816; see also Crazzolara 1950, 70 for similar characterisations). Whereas in Central Uganda entire kingdoms could at least nominally be converted to Christianity via the conversion of the king (Kabweyere 2000, 38), in the decentralized clan system of Acholiland each village and chief had to be convinced individually, and a chief’s conversion did not directly lead to the conversion of clan members: a reality which similarly plagued British attempts to establish indirect rule in the region (Dwyer 1972, 95–96). But there is also a second issue at stake, namely, what Wright referred to as the Acholi’s lacking ‘desire for anything spiritual’ (Wright 1919, 134). Much later, in what is certainly a simplification but conveying something important nonetheless, the Acholi anthropologist p’Bitek claimed that the Acholi do not think metaphysically, by which he did not refer to their lacking intellect, but

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23 According to Russel (1966), Christian churches began to grow considerably only in the 1920s, so that by 1966, he assessed that approximately 30% of the population (then 1 million people) belonged to either the Catholic or Protestant Church. In light of the 1959 Census, according to which 36% of the Acholi were Roman Catholic, 22% Protestant, and 1% Muslim (Gingyera-Pinyowa 1976, 20), Russel’s estimates are rather low, but perhaps reflect his general sense that at the time of his writing, ‘the Christian Faith had not yet reached the most vital part of the tribal existence’ (1966: 7): a sentiment shared by many Protestant and Catholic priests I spoke with in the 2000s, despite the high statistical prevalence of Christianity in the region. According to the 1991 Census, Catholics accounted for as much as 70% of the Acholi population, Protestants for 25%, and Muslims for only 1%. Since the 1991 Census, denominational statistics have not been published at the district level.
rather to his observation that in contrast with the European missionary tradition, ‘one does not find among the Acoli a barren preoccupation with certain kinds of abstract questions’ (Imbo 2008, 371). Wright’s claim that the Acholi were uninterested in the spiritual obviously rests on a culturally specific conceptualisation of ‘religion’ and ‘spirituality’, which is assumed to necessitate a fascination with a particularly type of metaphysics. Yet ethnographic studies by missionaries, later colonial anthropologists, and p’Bitek, all show clearly that prior to missionarisation, the Acholi already had an elaborate cosmology, and ways of engaging with the cosmological, which, I argue, Wright could have understood as ‘spiritual’ matters, had he not been so intent on understanding spirituality in a very narrow way.

In p’Bitek’s (1971b) view, the key problem was that the concepts through which explorers, missionaries, and later colonial anthropologists sought to describe the characteristics of, or the presumed absence of Acholi ‘religion’, were ill-suited to the task. While I fully agree with this argument, I take it seriously enough also to refrain, contrary to p’Bitek himself, from using the concept of ‘religion’ to characterize what I refer to above as Acholi ways of engaging with the cosmological. This is because – as, for instance, Cannell (2006) and Englund (2011b) have argued – the notion of ‘religion’, as of ‘faith’ and ‘belief’, is premised on certain culturally specific epistemological presuppositions, which are ill-suited to the task of describing the introduction of Christianity to Acholi lifeworlds. Rather, I use the concept of ‘clan practice’ (tic Acholi, tic translating roughly as ‘work’ [see also Victor and Porter in review]) in place of what is alternately referred to as Acholi ‘religion’, ‘tradition’, ‘superstition’, or ‘witchcraft’, depending on the source or my informants’ personal views on the matter. There are two reasons for this. First, as p’Bitek himself notes, the word ‘religion’ has no local equivalent in the Acholi language; hence the Arabic-originating dini, which is used in Swahili to refer to ‘religion’, was also borrowed into Acholi to refer to both of the region’s imported religions: Islam and Christianity, as has commonly been done in contexts of mission in Africa (Vähäkangas 2008, 115–16). A second reason for not referring to clan practice as ‘Acholi religion’ is that many of my informants, particularly Catholics, did not see Christianity and clan practice – or at least certain elements of clan practice – as mutually exclusive or irreconcilable (see also Victor and Porter In review).24

24 The established analytical terms that one could alternatively employ to describe the coexistence of ‘clan practice’ and ‘formal religion’, namely ‘syncretism’ (as often used in Religious Studies) and ‘inculturation’ (as used particularly in Catholic theology), are heavy with normative valuation, and lead one into mires of what, in light of this study, would be unnecessary academic debate (see, for instance, Meyer 1994). The view I endorse in this study is that all religions are, by nature, syncretistic and neither the ‘traditional religion’ / ‘culture’ (whatever one wishes to call it) in Acholi, nor the Catholic or Anglican ‘faith’ / ‘culture’, are or ever have been hermetically sealed entities (Fridlund and Vähäkangas 2017). Yet the notions of ‘formal religion’ and ‘clan practice’ are recognised by my informants as meaningful categories, even though their views on these categories’ limits, or morality, may differ. Indeed, as Gammelin (2017, 187) points out, it is necessary to query the relevance of analytical
A wealth of studies on Acholi clan practice show that one of its central aims is the identification and remedying of causes of misfortune and ill-health (E. Baines 2010; Finnström 2008; O’Byrne 2015; Victor and Porter In review). As p’Bitek has argued, in pre-Christian Acholi custom ‘there was no ultimate power, one responsible for the sum total of man’s sufferings and life’ (p’Bitek 1971b, 85); however, the causes of misfortune and ill-health could be attributed to jok (plural jogi). Defining jok is highly problematic, for as O’Byrne notes, ‘often the translation seems to confirm the assumptions and suspicions of the translator rather than giving an accurate rendering of the jok’ (O’Byrne 2015). Briefly put, and compared to the notion of an ultimate power, the jogi were and are perceived as multiple: some are attached to particular places, chiefdoms, or sub-clans, while others are ‘free’ agents capable of roaming and also of possessing a human being (E. Baines 2010; Victor and Porter In review; O’Byrne 2015). As O’Byrne notes, based on research among the Acholi-speaking Pajok in present-day South Sudan, what apparently was the primary understanding prior to Christianity – that both fortune and misfortune could be attributed to jogi – has largely been replaced with the view that jogi are essentially problematic (ibid., 9). This development is profoundly connected with processes of translation upon the initial encounters between missionaries and the Acholi.

p’Bitek shows how the terms with which missionaries conceptualised the world translated poorly into Acholi concepts, and vice versa, leading early CMS and Verona missionaries (both of whom produced their own Acholi versions of Christian texts), into constant dilemmas of translation – made all the trickier by the missionaries’ initial reliance on translators and catechists from language groups neighbouring the Acholi. Furthermore, as p’Bitek notes, the missionaries translated on the basis of their own ontological, normative, and religious givens; for instance, they were adamant that there had to be a supreme being among the jogi who was also the creator (p’Bitek 1971b, 49). In p’Bitek’s view the Acholi did not have a word for ‘create’ or ‘creator’, whereby

the question that the missionaries asked was not meaningful, because the imagery of man being moulded from clay did not exist in the language and the thinking of the Central Luo until the missionaries told them the story of Adam and the talking snake. But the choice of Lubanga is interesting, in that it was this Jok that breaks people’s backs and ‘moulds’ the shape of a man. (p’Bitek 1971b, 45)

concepts to those whose religious worlds are being described. In Uganda, ‘syncretism’ has a highly moralistic ring (see for instance Conger 2016) in a way that ‘clan practice’ does not, whereas there is a difference in the extent to which the Catholic and Protestant Church in Uganda embrace ‘inculturation’ – although ‘inculturation’ can simply be considered to be that part of the phenomenon of ‘syncretism’ that is decreed theoretically acceptable (Vähäkangas 2017, 81).
The Acholi word ultimately adopted by the Verona missionaries for the Christian God – *Lubanga* – was, therefore, a *jok* the Acholi believed to cause spinal tuberculosis, which moulded the patient into a hunchback. Well before p’Bitek’s scathing analysis of the failure of missionary translations, Crazzolara, a Verona priest, linguist and ethnographer, had described how the Acholi with whom he had spoken when he arrived in the region in 1911 had answered his questions about the world’s creator (a notion Crazzolara claimed could be expressed with the Acholi word *cweo*) in ways that led him to conclude that *Jok* would be the most suitable translation for ‘God’. The priest in charge of the Verona mission had, however, refused to adopt the translation on the grounds that the word *lajok* connoted black magician or, as it is translated at present, ‘witch’ (Crazzolara 1940). Thus the closest notion the Acholi had to a supernatural power, deity, or spirit – *jok* – was relegated to referencing the ultimate Evil in Christian cosmology. The Lugbara term, ‘Ruhanga’, as well as various other alternatives that were experimented with, disappeared over time, and the words *Lubanga* and *Rubanga* became the standard names for the Christian God: indeed – names in the plural. Due to the borrowing of related concepts from neighbouring languages, the two missions adopted different names for God, so that to this day one can differentiate Christians on the basis of whether they depart with wishes of *Rubanga okony* (God bless) if Catholic, or *Lubanga okony* if Protestant.

The befuddlement caused by all that was lost and confused in translation is captured in p’Bitek’s *Song of Lawino*, where Lawino, the wife of a man who has become a staunch follower of the white man’s ways and beliefs, ponders:

The Hunchback/ Where did he dig the clay/ For moulding things?
Where is the pot/ He dug the clay
For moulding Skyland/ And the clay for moulding Earth?
From the mouth of which river? (p’Bitek 1984, 138)

The process of translation did not only concern words, but ideas, and as p’Bitek has argued, in a spirit of early inculturation, missionaries had a keen interest in proving that some of their ideas were actually not so foreign to the Acholi. One of these remained that of a supreme deity. Twenty-five years after the commencement of missionary work in Acholiland, the Verona missionary Boccassino (1939) gathered texts on Acholi ‘traditional’ beliefs, and on the basis of these argued that belief in a supreme creator God had been endemic in Acholi prior to missionarisation. The answers Boccassino reaped were, however, ‘the harvest of the ideas that the earlier missionaries had sown’ over the preceding quarter of a century (p’Bitek 1971b, 45);

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25 Crazzolara (1940) attributes the differentiation of *Rubanga* and *Lubanga* to the borrowing of similar concepts from neighbouring languages, since in Acholi, there is no R/L slippage. Kihangire’s (1957, 29–31) account for neighbouring Lango is almost identical. He also observed with appreciation that at the time of his writing, many Lango Christians had adopted the word ‘*Jok*’ to refer to the Supreme God.
consequently, for Boccassino to claim that the Christian notion of a creator was endemic to Acholi was in fact a form of intellectual smuggling (see also p’Bitek 1971a). In p’Bitek’s scathing critical view, similar processes are evident in studies by Catholic theologians over subsequent decades, such as that by Kihangire (1957), who systematized what he claimed were ten traditional Acholi rules of conduct, which appeared strikingly akin to the Ten Commandments in the Christian Bible (p’Bitek 1971b, 48).

The lasting repercussions of the shortcomings of translation, and of the endeavours of missionaries to find family resemblances between Acholi clan practice and Christianity, were also evident during my fieldwork. For instance, the ‘Acholi ten commandments’ were cited to me both by a retired Protestant bishop and an avowed traditionalist and public criticiser of the Christian churches. Many Catholics and Protestants also explained to me that Jok should really have been the word that missionaries selected for God, although it was invariably considered too late to change the word now. Many of my informants, both Catholic and Protestant, also told me with conviction that there had already been an idea of a supreme God in Acholi belief prior to Christianity.

Culture, custom, and doctrine are never immutable, and what is or was the ‘pure and original’ is an impossible question to solve, but it is also rather irrelevant to my analysis of the embeddedness of Christianity in contemporary Acholiland. What is more relevant for the argument I present in this chapter is the simple recognition that missionary endeavours in Acholiland have had cosmological repercussions: not only in the sense that missionaries have introduced a wholly new religion, of which localised interpretations and translations have emerged, but also that missionary work has moulded the views among the Acholi about what was and is their ‘own’ cosmology, tradition, and clan practice (for a similar argument on Sonjo cosmology in Northern Tanzania, see Vähäkangas 2008). In this sense then, missionary churches in Acholiland can be seen as cosmologically embedded in complex ways that also impact on what is seen as desirable, and as possible, in the aftermath of war.

**Political embeddedness: mission and state in colonial Uganda**

Religion has been a crucial component in the evolution of Uganda’s political system, and remains so today. From the national to the ‘grassroots’ level, Christianity has become deeply politically embedded, in that religious and political considerations, religious and political institutions, and communities engaged with religion or politics, are enmeshed with one another or, when it comes to individuals, are often one and the same. The initial parameters for religion and politics in Uganda were set down during the early decades of the colonial era, and it is these that I focus on in the following; later developments will be discussed in further detail in Chapter Four.

Missionaries were a crucial component in the process of colonization, to the extent that the political historian Karugire has quipped that he is ‘justified in classifying
[explorers, missionaries, and the actual agents of imperial rule] as but part of the same process of colonialism quite simply because they were’ (Karugire 1980, 62). Yet the relationship between missionaries and the colonial establishment in Acholiland was far from straightforward. Both CMS (Holger Bernt Hansen 1984; Pirouet 1978) and Verona missionaries (Cisternino 2004) had constantly to weigh their short-term and long-term goals, as well as their different allegiances – to the competing mission, to local chiefs, and to the colonial state – so as to ensure their survival and maintain their right and ability to continue their work. Throughout the decades of the Uganda Company, the protectorate, and the colony, the colonial state establishment also deliberated on how best to arrange the relationship between state and religion. Alternatives ranged between religious liberalism in the style of the United States, implying a strict separation of state and church, to models based on a UK-style, closer union between church and state institutions (Holger Bernt Hansen 1984). These early deliberations remain central to understanding Ugandan political institutions and debates to this day.

Like elsewhere in the British Empire, the limited resources of the British colonial administration rendered it dependent on missionaries to fulfil integral roles in the colonial project (Holger Bernt Hansen 1984). Unlike colonial officers, missionaries tended to stay in the same area for a long time, learning the local language and becoming familiar with local customs and culture, making them crucial intermediaries between local chiefs and colonial officials. In Acholiland, the Verona missionaries had a clear advantage in that their previous experience among other Nilotic groups in southern Sudan had paved the way to their learning the Acholi language and familiarised them with the culture, while for the CMS, whose prior experience was among Bantu people, Acholiland was in many ways completely new and foreign. Furthermore, as Pirouet’s (1978) study details, due to the relative unimportance accorded to the Acholi region, the spread of Anglicanism in the area was largely in the hands of catechists from neighbouring groups (particularly Bunyoro), than in those of English missionaries.

Missionaries required the goodwill of the colonial administration to make their work possible. Securing colonialists’ support was particularly crucial for the primarily Italian and Austrian Verona missionaries who, due to their nationality, were on the wrong side of the battle lines in the World Wars. In contrast, CMS missionaries shared language, nationality, and denomination with the representatives of the

26 Cisternino was also an ordained Comboni priest.

27 While missionaries and colonialists did have separate institutional structures, they were also not always self-evidently distinguishable from one another. During the years running up to the Uganda protectorate, both the Catholic White Fathers (which arrived in Uganda in 1879) and the CMS (which arrived in Uganda in 1877) were akin to mini-states; they eventually had their own weapons and armed forces, and in the case of the Protestant Church Missionary Society, even an adjunct trade company, the Uganda Company (Karugire 1980, 129).
colonial power, but they were insufficient in number to provide all the services the colonial government expected of them and, in any case, the Brussels Act of 1890 obliged Britain to allow Verona missionaries to work in its colonies. Yet suspicion was rife and coloured state-mission relations, and during the Second World War all Italian and Austrian missionaries were interned by the British at the Catholic seminary in Gulu (Mugarura, Mwaka, and Lane 1998, 36–37).

The practical priority of both the CMS and the Verona missionaries was the opening of schools and the provision of education; the ‘magic’ of writing was what people wanted to learn, and literacy was also a priority for the colonial government, to which end missionary education was supported with government grants (Gingyera-Pinywc 1976, 21; see also Willis 1914, 7). Both missionaries and colonialists believed that Western education was the essential tool for imparting the skills necessary for ‘development’ to take root in the colony, but missionary schooling also assisted in rooting out those forms of local belief which were seen to constitute a form of opposition to colonial rule, such as the protective witchcraft practiced by Acholi ajwaki (spirit mediums) (Whitmore 2013). Provision of formal education remained in the hands of missionaries until 1925, at which time the government, following the spirit of the Phelps-Stokes Commission on indigenizing education in Africa, set up a governmental department of education to complement missionary teaching (Tiberonwa 1977, 82).

However, the colonial government’s investments in education in northern Uganda paled in comparison to those made in other parts of Uganda (Karugire 1980, 70–71); moreover, the majority of schools in Acholi were Catholic. Theoretically, the schools were open to anyone, but the expectation was that students would convert to the religion of the founding church, causing great concern for the colonial government which, in its 1940 Secondary Education Policy Committee Report, encouraged the CMS to establish schools with a ‘more definitely British character’ in Acholi (quoted in Kabwegaere 2000, 160). Ironically, the colonial government was simultaneously concerned that the division between Protestant and Catholic schools might provide a ground for the development of entrenched political divisions (Gingyera-Pinywc 1976, 21–35; Holger Bernt Hansen 1984; Tiberonwa 1977, 74), a concern that was to prove well-founded.

As the primary focus of missionary activities in Acholi, education was also the arena for the fiercest competition between the two missions (Gingyera-Pinywc 1976). Intense rivalry between Catholics and Protestants in Uganda had already begun during the early scuffle for favour with the Kabaka’s court in Buganda28 in the late 19th century. The religious wars of the time ended with British soldiers under

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28 Buganda was the largest kingdom in the Great Lakes region and its king was called the Kabaka. The language spoken in this region is Luganda, and its people are referred to as Muganda in the singular, and Baganda in the plural.
Captain Lugard coming to support the Protestant contingent and remove the Catholics from positions of authority (Ward 1991).

The colonial government showed many kinds of preferential treatment towards the Protestants. District commissioners often sided with the CMS in land disputes between the two missions, and CMS missionaries, unlike their Verona equivalents, were involved in choosing and installing the new chiefs – 13 of the altogether 36 Acholi baptised before 1913 became nyodi kalam (Pirouet 1978, 165); and all of this caused resentment among Catholic missionaries (see e.g. Cisternino 2004 for ample examples of missionary rivalry).29 The Verona were, however, far more numerous and endowed with better financial resources, since reaching these parts of Africa had been at the very core of the vision and dream of their founder, Daniel Comboni (Comboni Missionaries Uganda N.D.). In contrast, despite the vision of individual CMS missionaries of increasing their efforts in the north, the authorities in London did not provide substantial support for the CMS’s work in the area (Onono-Ongweng, Holmes, and Lumumba 2004, 26). By 1967, the greater northern region (encompassing Acholiland, Karamojong, Lango, and West Nile) had thirty two Catholic mission stations served by ordained missionary priests, in comparison to the Protestants’ four. Although the CMS had few well-resourced mission stations with foreign missionaries, ‘where there was a Catholic station there would generally be some kind of Protestant station too, however small’ (ibid.), but their presence was far more humble, as it has remained up till this day.

One can imagine that from the perspective of the Acholi, it was often hard to tell missionaries and colonial officials apart, particularly in cases when missionaries took on tasks of the colonial administration (see Pirouet 1978, 157). Often, however, missionaries opposed or criticized colonial officials’ use of violence (see, e.g., Cisternino 2004; Shepherd 1929, 161–63), to the extent that the Protestant missionary Lloyd’s complaints against colonial officials led to him being referred to in government correspondence as ‘the notorious Mr. Lloyd’ (monthly report by colonial officials, cited in Dwyer 1972, 115). Due in part to the criticism they frequently received from missionaries, some colonial officials were actively unsupportive of missionaries’ efforts (2004, 27; see also Dwyer 1972, 112–21), and at times individual missionaries were called away after finding themselves on bad terms with the responsible colonial district commissioner (Holger Bernt Hansen 1984, 314). In sum

29 The CMS and the Verona missionaries were institutionally each other’s competitors but the worst rivalries occurred between individuals, just as continues to be the case between Protestants and Catholics in contemporary Kitum (see Chapter Nine). Describing a particularly fierce feud between a Catholic and Protestant missionary, Cisternino writes aptly: ‘[the CMS Reverend] Fisher and [the Verona Father] Beduschi were undoubtedly two steel blades, two pieces of flint; and the more sparks they produced the happier they were... The two Missionaries [sic] produced sparks and would set that whole savannah on fire even up to our time, founding a Church and a population which remained divided and always in competition, as had previously happened in Kampala and Hoima.’ (2004, 392)
it seems likely that, as Hansen writes more generally about CMS missionaries in Uganda,

[even] when the mission defended African interests it was done on the basis of an acceptance of the colonial system. The aim was to secure reasonable and decent conditions for Africans within the colonial order, but it was not the mission’s place to question that order’s existence as such. (Holger Bernt Hansen 1984, 313)

Overall, it seems missionaries were most likely to speak on behalf of the Acholi when doing so served their interests of establishing or maintaining influence among local communities. The Verona priest Vignato, for instance, is said to have characterized his relationship with the District Commissioner in Kitgum in the following way: ‘They say that I polish the Englishman’s shoes. Not only will I polish them, but even kiss them if the Mission’s survival is at stake’ (quoted in Cisternino 2004, 410). As Whitmore has argued based on his reading of the Acholi Macon – the authoritative history of the Acholi that is still used in schools today (authored by a Verona missionary) – the quandary facing missionaries was that to speak or write strongly against the colonial empire would have risked expulsion (2013). This was also the case in Kitgum. After describing the social and material embeddedness of the churches I studied through an account of the growth of Kitgum town and its missions, I will return to the themes brought up in Whitmore’s study by analysing another case besides the Acholi Macon, in which I argue the Catholic Church has largely eliminated politics and violence from the story of Acholiland’s missionary-colonial past.

Social and material embeddedness: the growth of Kitgum town and its missions

In the above I have described the broad contours that characterised the commencement of Christian missionary work in Acholiland: how churches through their relations with the state became embedded in the political landscape of Uganda, and the cosmological repercussions of these developments. In this section, I turn to describing the arrival of the two rival missions in Kitgum, interpreting it as a process leading to the two churches’ present-day embeddedness in the town’s social and material landscape.

The first missionaries settled in Kitgum a few years after the town was formally established in 1912 by District Commissioner Postlethwaite. The Italian Verona missionaries established a well-manned mission station in Kitgum in February 1915 (Gulu Archdiocese 2012, 7), whereas CMS missionaries were sent to Kitgum at some point between 1913 and 1915 – sources differ on the exact year (Onono-Ongweng, Holmes, and Lumumba 2004, 43) – to a district where CMS missionaries described the local residents as being ‘wilder than in Gulu’ (Wright 1919, 134). Ever since then, and up till 2015 when Kitgum Mission was handed over to the local Catholic Diocese
(see Chapters Five and Six), the Catholic Mission remained one of the strongholds of
the Verona (later Comboni) missionaries in Acholiland, and was served by expatriate
missionaries. In contrast, the Protestant Mican had white missionaries only very
briefly in the early years; these were soon replaced with native catechists and clergy,
first from other parts of Uganda, but later increasingly from Acholiland.

The growth of Kitgum town, from a tiny village to a substantial district centre, was
accompanied by a growth in the town’s population, a considerable part of which
clustered around the new mission stations which were established approximately two
kilometres from the district administrative centre, and separated from each other by a
similar distance (Cisterino 2004; Ocitti 1966). The land on the left-hand side of
what later developed into a road from Kitgum towards Palabek was allocated to the
Protestants, while the Catholics were granted the right to settle on the eastern side of
the pathway to Mucwini. At the time, eastern Acholi was very sparsely populated, and
the specifics of who exactly gave the mission land, and how much of it, were not really
at issue. Since then, population growth and increased land pressure have, however,
brought these questions to the fore in ways that highlight the historical roots of
contemporary church embeddedness. Two interesting points emerge from this early
history of missionary settlement.

First, the case highlights the way in which churches are embedded in relations
within and between local communities, and how the negotiations between
missionaries, colonial officials, and local communities resonate up till today. Notably,
when missionaries arrived in Kitgum in the early 1900s, they were given rights to land
both by colonial authorities, and by elders of the Lemo clan, which had used the area
in question for grazing. There are no official documents about the original agreement
between the Lemo and the Catholic missionaries; what is known is based on what
elders involved in the negotiations told younger clan members who are still alive
today, and now elders in the community themselves. The colonial administration
eventually gave the missionaries a document giving the church the right to 50 acres of
land for 49 years. This Temporary Occupation Licence, or TOL, covered less than
10% of the land area that Lemo elders, Catholic clergy, former neighbours of the
parish, and the local land officer consider to this day to be the land granted to the
mission by the Lemo.

By 1959 the population had grown exponentially from the early 19th century, when the population
consisted of small scattered settlements, to 3,454 inhabitants. At this point the town only covered
approximately 7.8 square kilometres (Ocitti 1966), as compared to the present Town Council area of
approximately 30 square kilometres, in which a population of almost 45,000 was recorded in the latest

For more on TOL agreements, see Hansen (1984).

It was also not possible for the researchers to see a copy of the original TOL document or of the
extended land title. Rather, research materials include tens of interviews, and copies of other available
documents such as blurry survey maps, letters circulated in the parish, and reports and petitions.
Second, the history of the establishment of the missions underlines how the churches contributed to the emergence of new types of sociality and new communities. In Kitgum, CMS and Verona missionaries invited converts from all over Eastern Acholiland to come and settle around the missions. The missionaries also had things for the migrants to do, particularly at the Catholic Mission: some of those who moved worked on constructing the hospital and church, others came to work at the clinic, others to train as catechists, while yet other converts were drawn to the location to make a living in affinity with the new religion and the modern healthcare and education it promised. These original neighbours of the missions, who were usually described to me as ‘committed Catholics’ or ‘foreigners’ depending on whether the speaker was descended from them or from the Lemo, built their homes alongside the Mission, had children, and settled down. They became the first members of a wholly new type of community, one based on religious affiliation rather than clan. Drawing on the archived diaries of the Catholic Mission in Kitgum, Cisternino describes how one Verona priest, a Piedmontese who was sent to take care of the Mission in 1918, was trying to put some order into the management of the station, transforming it on the model of his previous station ... turning it into a Christian village with its own mayor ... installing married couples there, catechumens with young families, exclusively Christian, so as to create a kind of social mini-climate inspired by Christian tradition and management, and in which the strong anti-Christian traditions of Acholi society were supposedly very much reduced. (Cisternino 2004, 475)\(^3\)

As I will describe in more detail in the final part of this chapter, outside of this new ‘Christian village’, Acholiland was being hit hard by disease, famine, and the forced labour and violence imposed by the colonial government. In contrast, in the communities that grew around the missions in Kitgum, there was a new religion and, rather crucially, a chance of some assistance in the form of income, clothing, or food, and particularly after the Verona Sisters started a clinic at the Catholic Mission in 1925, new medicine.\(^4\)

The ‘social mini-climate inspired by Christian tradition’ that Cisternino (ibid.) describes, has proven surprisingly resilient over the past century. The identification of

\(^3\) The separation of converts from their communities, and hence from their duties towards lineage elders / chiefs, enabled a separation also from what were considered pagan ritual practices (see Kallinen 2014, 161–62 for discussion on similar settlements in Ghana).

\(^4\) For more on the history of the hospital, see the hospital website (Saint Joseph’s Hospital 2015).
certain parts of Kitgum town as predominantly Protestant and others as Catholic was actively upheld during the colonial era both by missionaries and their adherents, and this denominational demographic differentiation has to some extent persisted up till this day. Many prominent Catholic families continue to live around the Mission, and Protestant families around Mican. However, while the area around the Catholic mission was identified as predominantly Catholic during my fieldwork, the people living in the area surrounding the Protestant Church were increasingly of mixed denominations. This was partly due to many Protestants’ having shifted to other churches as a result of the conflict within the Church of Uganda (see Chapter Nine), but the change had also come about as a result of the war, during which all residential areas near the urban centre were packed with people seeking the comparative safety of town. These developments, and the ways in which they were described by my informants, highlight something of how the churches have become embedded in the social fabric and the narratives with which ideal sociality is described in contemporary Kitgum.

As my informants often told me, ‘all sorts of people from the villages came around’ during the time of the war; for instance, numerous informants claimed that witchcraft practice and alcoholism had increased during this time. The ‘original’ committed Catholic and Protestant residents and their descendants in these areas were typically seen as having been less likely to engage in such activities. Elderly informants who lived near the missions repeatedly described to me how good life had been in the neighbourhood in their childhood; all the people had gone to church, and the relationship among the people, and between the people and the priests, had been very close. In comparison, things were now more confused, the young people more disorderly, and the state of things at the churches also a bit too mixed up for most of the elderly adherents’ liking.

The discussion so far has aimed to show that the narratives against which the present, the past, and the future are measured in contemporary Kitgum, whether political, cosmological, or something in between, are profoundly entangled with the history of missionary work in Acholiland. In the final part of this chapter, I return to the entanglements of religion and politics in Acholi history, claiming that through the past century dimensions of politics and violence in the processes by which churches

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35 The largest of Kitgum’s camps for internally displaced people was also located adjacent to the Protestant Church in Mican. Increased insecurity outside the town led the population to increase to 52,380 by May 2006 (Kitgum District Local Government 2012). In the early 2010’s, the population was expected to grow to almost 65,000 by 2010 (UN-Habitat 2012, 9) but the 2014 Census showed the population had decreased from the highpoint of war-time insecurity to 44,604, indicating that although the war led to the town’s expansion, many people chose to return to their villages once life in the town was no longer notably safer than in outlying areas. This was also evident in the areas surrounding Mission and Mican, where my informants told me population density had decreased notably since the end of the war.
have become embedded have been naturalised. While there is no reason to critique this naturalisation in so far as it leads Acholi Catholics and Protestants to experience a strong sense of ownership over their churches, I do argue that this naturalisation is in part achieved through a troubling silencing of the political and violent aspects of missionary history in the region.

Image 9. Painting of Acholi martyrs in the church of St Mary of Immaculate Conception. The names of Verona / Comboni missionaries who have worked at the Mission are listed in the arches.
The martyrs in Paimol: reinterpreting the missionary / colonial past

The death in 1918 of two Acholi catechists, Jildo Irwa and Daudi Okelo, in Paimol, some 70 kilometres east of Kitgum Mission, has become a powerful symbol for the contemporary Catholic Church in Acholiland. They are, in the words of Joseph Okumu, the Acholi priest responsible for gathering the evidence required for the martyrs’ beatification, ‘models of freedom, apostolic zeal, truth, justice, responsibility, forgiveness and reconciliation’ (Gulu Archdiocese 2012). According to the story of the martyrs as told in Catholic accounts, the two young catechists were so determined to spread the Good News to yet unreached parts of Acholiland that they departed for this distant destination despite the cautionary words of the Verona priests at Kitgum Mission who had baptised them. The catechists taught reading, writing, and catechism to all those who wanted to learn, and held prayers in the hut granted to them by the local sub-chief. A small hand-out about the martyrs that I was given at the commemoration of their beatification in 2012, explains their deaths in the following manner:

People who opposed the new religion took advantage of socio-political unrest to stop the preaching of the Gospel in Paimol. The two catechists were hounded, threatened, ordered to give up their activities, and finally speared to death. (Gulu Archdiocese 2002)

There was indeed socio-political unrest in the region. Resistance to colonialism did not end with the quelling of the Lamogi rebellion or the establishment of Gulu and Kitgum towns. I suggest, therefore, in slight contradiction to the official Catholic interpretation, that the introduction of the new religion can and should be understood as part of the socio-political unrest, rather than the latter being seen as a veil beneath which opposition to the new religion could take place. A closer description of the case, and reflections on how the martyrs were commemorated in 2012, provides an illustration of how the colonial and missionary past is re-interpreted in the present.

The death of the catechists Jildo and Daudi occurred amid a widespread revolt against foreign rule and influences in eastern Acholiland in which people in the area, who had been harshly hit by an epidemic of smallpox in 1917 and a serious drought-induced famine in 1918, were demanding an end to the enforced labour and taxation imposed by the district governor on top of their other sufferings. Many in the area blamed the drought and the epidemic on the catechists, who were leading people to neglect clan practice. Anger came to a head when the anointed የ Floral, Lakidi, and his sub-chief, Ogwal, were deposed and replaced with a new chief from a neighbouring

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36 The catechists are estimated to have been 16-18 and 12-14 respectively at the time of their death (Gulu Archdiocese 2012).
region’s clan, who had gone to Protestant boarding school and was more amenable to
the policies of the colonial government. (Cisternino 2004, 475–90)

On October 18th, revolt broke out. Children of the deposed sub-chief, Ogwal,
attacked the compound in which Jildo and Daudi were staying and speared the
catechists to death. A parallel attack on the newly-imposed rwoot kalam failed, but in
nearby villages, numerous foreigners were killed, as well as local Catholic converts.
Eventually, the rebellion was quelled with similar measures as had been used six years
earlier in Lamogi. Rwoot Lakidi and his sub-chief were taken to prison in Kitgum; one
of the rebels was publically hanged on Christmas Eve while the rebellion still
continued and once others were caught two more were hanged, ‘with ... solemn
ceremonial, after receiving Baptism from Fr. Cesar’ at Kitgum Mission (Cisternino
2004, 487). According to a letter written by a Verona father, Chief Lakidi, who had
been deposed by the colonial government and later appeared as the leader of what
were called the ‘Paimol rebels’, had told the priest prior to his execution:

I was only against the Miri [government] that had unjustly dethroned me, and
with one pretext or another stripped me of my livestock and kept me for months
imprisoned in Kitgum. I had promised to send my son to the Catholic Mission,
and if he did not come it was because the karani [clerk] had told me that the Miri
wanted the Chiefs’ children to be sent to the Protestants and not to you. (Letter
published in the Verona missionaries’ magazine La Nigrizia in May 1919, quoted
in Cisternino 2004, 487)

According to missionary sources reproduced by Cisternino, local Catholics in Paimol
had from the beginning seen Daudi and Okello as having ‘died for the cause of
Religion’ (Cisternino 2004, 490; Gulu Archdiocese 2012). The Verona missionaries
were, however, slow to come to agreement on the matter among themselves. While
some of the priests of the time agreed that the two catechists were indeed martyrs, the
priests at Kitgum Mission did not collect the bodies from Paimol to give the catechists
a Christian burial in the mission graveyard. It was only in the 1990s that steps were
taken to call for their beatification, which eventually took place in 2002, since which
time the martyrs of Paimol have become a powerful symbol for Acholi Catholics.

Based on the accounts provided by Cisternino, it seems fair to say that the martyrs
were killed not only for their faith, but as an outcome of widespread resistance to the
disruption of social, political, and cultural life that colonial rule had brought to
Acholiland. Cisternino argues that rather than resisting the new God and his
emissaries, the people resisted the colonial government, and all those who were
associated with it: the tribes of bongo (European clothing) and waraga (paper)
(Cisternino 2004, 484). Yet while the correspondence between Verona priests after
the event, as well as official documents gathered in support of the beatification, take
careful stock of the political context of the Paimol rebellion, the story produced of the
martyrs in northern Uganda contemporarily is taken completely out of this broader
historical and political context. For instance, at the commemoration of the martyrs in 2012 which I attended in Paimol, not a single reference was made to the political context within which the martyrs were killed: not to the imposition of colonial order, or the forcefully imposed new religion brought by the missionaries, or the killing of the many Paimol rebels at the hands of the colonial government.

During my fieldwork, people who openly expressed (to me) any resentment towards the missionary heritage were few and very far between, and I never heard Catholics speak of the martyrs as part of a story not only of Christian courage and resilience, but also of colonial conquest and religious expansion. While individual clergy were often keen to engage in ‘inculturating’ Catholic practice to resonate with Acholi custom, the body of the Catholic Church, that is, its members, never expressed to me the kind of postcolonial critique of missionary work that permeates, for instance, Okot p’ Bitek’s razor-sharp analysis and prose about the missionary enterprise in Acholiland (p’Bitek 1971b, 1984). In the Protestant Church, this type of sentiment was even more strikingly absent, including among the clergy.

Those who criticised the missionaries usually did so on the grounds that they felt the missionaries were partial in their granting of assistance or jobs. Some also said that they saw it as positive that the Verona missionaries were finally leaving and the church could be in the hands of their own priests. But even in these cases, the sharpest edge of the criticisms was never directed at the churches as such. For the Catholics and Protestants among whom I did my fieldwork, the church was their church, not the church of the white men: a church to which they belonged, whether firmly or not, not a church imposed upon them by others. Within the Catholic or Protestant public as I came to know it in Kitgum, there was no discussion about the violent history of the colonisation of Uganda and the role of missionaries in this project. This is evident in the way in which the story of the martyrs of Paimol was interpreted within the Catholic Church. To make this claim, I return to another retelling of a historical story, the interpretation offered by Todd Whitmore in his reading of the Verona priest Pellegrini’s Acholi Macon.

Based on his analysis of Verona missionaries’ personal diaries and letters, Whitmore holds that following advice to be ‘prudent’, the missionaries who worked in northern Uganda during the early decades of colonialism opted to remain publicly silent about colonial atrocities that they had witnessed and which they condemned in private (Whitmore 2013, 23). Eventually, Whitmore argues, the Verona missionaries, swayed by their gratitude to the Pax Britannica that had brought respite to their colleagues after the Mahdist War in Sudan, as well as their fear of expulsion in the aftermath of the Second World War, replaced this stance of careful silence with active support for the colonial project. Whitmore bases this claim on his critical reading of the Acholi Macon – as noted above, the authoritative history of the Acholi still used in schools today – in which he claims the Verona priest Pellegrini ‘rewrote salvation history’ (Pellegrini 1949; Whitmore 2013, 4). The saviour in this story was the British
explorer Samuel Baker, whom the Verona missionaries’ founder, Daniel Comboni, had decried in an early letter to his superior as carrying out in Acholiland a ‘violent invasion’, in consequence of which ‘many thousands of Africans were killed’ (Writings of Daniel Comboni, quoted in Cisternino 2004, 80). In contrast, in Pellegrini’s Acholi Macon Baker is described as having come to Acholiland to banish the Arab slave trade, and being received with jubilation by the people in Gulu (Pellegrini 1949, 37-41).37 I argue that a similar depoliticised reading of the past as that recognised by Whitmore in Acholi Macon – a reading in which violence is silenced and a perceived victory of good over evil celebrated – can be seen in prevailing Catholic narratives concerning the Acholi martyrs.

While the martyrs’ story could be interpreted and utilised to advance a postcolonial critique of the violent roots of colonialism in Acholiland, and the ways in which missionary work served the violence of Empire, it is not. Rather, the martyrs have been transformed into a symbol that simply answers questions that are of immediate relevance to Christians and the Catholic Church in Acholiland today. This came out eloquently in the sermon given by a Comboni missionary at the commemoration of the martyrs in 2012. Every year in October the commemoration attracts thousands of pilgrims – and hundreds of merchants selling food, drink, and Catholic trinkets to the pilgrims – to the place of their death, which was renamed Wi-Polo (in Heaven) by local residents after their martyrdom. In the sermon, given in English before it was translated into Acholi, the priest first re-told the official story of the martyrs, that is, with no reference to the political context in which their deaths took place, after which he analysed it in light of the Bible readings of the day:

In the book of Wisdom it says that those who follow God become worthy of God and worthy of themselves. These young people [the martyrs] could speak to others the sense of worthiness they themself had experienced: your life is worthy, your life is important! ... We can now ask, why do we come to the wilderness of Paimol? To this very spot, where they were murdered? There is nothing here, yet we come here because they are meaningful to us, they give sense for our existence, we are searching for worthiness. In Kampala, there are big people, big cars, rich people; at their side we feel unworthy. But we don’t have those people here. Here we are among simple people. Here where we look at the beauty of the mountains, we see something beautiful. Beauty is the truth. Beauty created by God is the truth. The young beautiful children of God, Jildo and Daudi, they are the truth. Once a year, when we come here to look for worthiness, that is beautiful ... Tomorrow we will again be confronted by the crisis of faith. The

37 A similar ambivalence regarding views on Baker is evident in Girling’s ethnography, where he both describes Baker as a man who loved meting out physical punishments to what he saw as the inferior Africans, yet notes how broadly he was revered in Acholi as the man who put an end to slave trade in the region (Girling 1960, 135-41).
crisis of family, the crisis of politics. There is crisis everywhere! There is confusion, corruption, drugs. People have lost the meaning of existence. This is crisis! They are looking, but they don’t know for what.... We are here to find strength to serve... New evangelisation begins here, at the source, where these two young men, Jildo and Daudi, lost their lives for the Gospel. We need their courage, we need their faith. (Fieldwork notes, 20 October 2012)

The priest ended his sermon with a call to service directed to the many young people in the crowd – service as catechists, as priests, as sisters, as brothers, as dedicated Christians, and as the future dedicated heads of Christian families – and with a request to all the pilgrims to renew their faith and commitment to the Church.

By pointing out the way in which the violent past is silent in this re-telling of the story of the martyrs, I wish to make two points. The first is not that I consider these contemporary readings false, or unimportant. Clearly, the search for meaning, direction, and hope is an important one for Catholic Ugandans, and the search for committed staff members and supporters a vital one for the Church as an institution. But I do argue that considering the violence of the missionary-colonial past, the degree to which contemporary forms of political violence have their roots in these historical legacies, and the extent to which religion has been employed to legitimate political violence in Uganda’s distant and more recent history (see the following chapter), the Catholic Church in Acholiland could well draw self-critically on its own key stories to deal with issues that desperately need addressing in contemporary Uganda.

The second point shifts my focus from the bishop who told the martyr’s story, which I carefully recorded in my notebook, to the crowd gathered to listen to him. The request the bishop made was essentially the same as that made by the missionaries and the martyred catechists one hundred years ago. Yet it was blatantly clear to those gathered under the heat of the sun on the hill in Paimol that everything had changed. Acholiland had been transformed in innumerable ways by half a century of colonial rule and a century of Christian mission. However much there was in social, cultural, and individual lives that remained untouched by the Christian message in the ways the missionaries would have liked them to be touched, on the hill of Wi-Polo the heaven that touched the pilgrims was not considered an alien imposition or a foreign influence by the gathered Acholi Christians. The joyful ululating of the many-thousand-headed crowd, the radiant smiles on the faces of the young girls dressed in traditional Acholi garb for their dances of praise during the hymns, the Small Christian Communities and delegations from neighbouring parishes lining up under the banners of their individual parishes and communities to bring offertory gifts for the development of better facilities for future pilgrimages – it was to their martyrs that they sang praise and gave: their God, their Church.
Image 10. Liturgical dancers perform moderated versions of traditional Acholi dances during special Catholic services, such as the commemoration of the Acholi martyrs. (Paimol, October 2012)

Image 11. Every year, thousands of Catholic pilgrims arrive to commemorate the Acholi martyrs. Representatives of other churches and religious groups also participate. (Paimol, October 2012)
A Comboni missionary once lamented to me that for a hundred years, the Comboni had worked in northern Uganda, yet the Acholi were still scheming against each other, still not getting married in church, still jealous, still fighting each other: not unlike the Italians, almost 2,000 years after Christianity reached them, I realized only in hindsight. In some ways, the elderly missionary’s feeling that nothing much had changed was spot-on. Individuals and cultures are indeed resistant to change. But the idea that mission had left no dent in Acholi society was clearly wrong. From the written form of the Acholi language, to the language in which people in contemporary Kitgum talk of development or forgiveness, to the way in which politics and church entwine, even the layout of Kitgum town - missionary impact in northern Uganda has been immense. Through complex processes of adaptation, resistance, and change, mainline churches have become cosmologically, politically, socially, and materially embedded in Acholiland, and influence the contours of the narrative imagination in profound ways.

When driving into Kitgum with my family in 2012, the question, ‘Mission tye kwene’ which I addressed to people gathered to inspect the vegetables available at Corner Mission market, was answered with a smile and a wave of the hand: down that road. We found the Catholic Mission, where a youth event was culminating in singing and traditional dancing in the parish hall, and eventually also the parish priest who fetched the keys to our new home. It was only over months of fieldwork, and years of thinking through that fieldwork, that I realised how profound that first question that I asked in Kitgum truly was: ‘Where is mission?’; and it is that question I have sought to answer in this chapter. In the following, I turn my focus to the intertwinings of religion, politics, and violence in post-independence Acholiland.
Chapter 4

Church, state, war

Whereas the previous chapter focused mainly on the first decades of colonial and missionary expansion in Acholiland in order to illustrate the historical roots of the embeddedness of missionary churches in contemporary Acholi society, this chapter analyses the unfolding of church-state relations in the region, from the run-up to the country’s independence in 1962, through the decades following it, and up until the present moment. The chapter has two primary aims. First, I seek to explore how churches, and church-state relations, have moulded the institutional and imaginational contours of politics in Uganda. My main argument is that although the political system has changed considerably during the time span considered, much of the way in which politics is conceptualized reproduces patterns embedded in the institutions and political imaginaries of earlier times. Since Uganda’s independence history has seen so many extended periods of war and widespread political violence, the second aim of this chapter is to describe the ways in which mainline churches have related to this upheaval.

Analyses of church-state relations in Uganda (for the most comprehensive, see Holger Bernt Hansen 1984; Ward 2005) and the overview provided in this chapter highlight that the relationships between mainline churches and the Ugandan state have fluctuated considerably throughout Uganda’s independence, and been influenced both by the political outlook of the regime, and by its regional and ethnic base (see Alava and Ssentongo 2016). Hence, while my analysis in this chapter in part resonates with claims made in previous research regarding, for instance, Ugandan churches’ impact on ‘democratisation’ as a whole (see e.g. Gifford 1995, 1998; Okuku 2003), I take my primary lead from Ward’s assertion about the Protestant Church, which holds equally for the Catholic, that churches in Uganda have ‘reflected – or rather, embodied – the tensions and conflicts operating within state and society’ (Ward 1995, 73).

The chapter proceeds as follows. First, I draw an outline of debates about the contours of church-state relations in the period just prior to independence, with a focus on northern Uganda. The second part of the chapter runs through changes in the mainline churches’ public roles during the first decades of Uganda’s independence under successive military regimes, leading up to 1986 and the take-over by Yoweri Museveni’s National Resistance Movement (NRM). Here, I discuss in particular the great extent to which the political imaginaries that structure church-state relations in Uganda are influenced by questions of ethnicity and location. Third, before turning to the NRM phase in Uganda’s political history, I reflect on some of the ways in which these earlier historical layers appear in contemporary debates about politics in Kitgum. Fourth, the chapter analyses the NRM regime’s impact on churches at a national level,
closing with a discussion about the positionalities churches have adopted vis-à-vis the war triggered in Acholiland by Museveni’s take-over. Finally, in anticipation of Chapter Five, I consider the difficulty of writing about atrocity, and suggest the adoption of a tentative rather than fully expository approach when tasked with producing scholarly narratives of war.

Preparing for independence

As the previous chapter began to indicate, religion, politics, and ethnicity were intricately enmeshed with one another in the colonial era, resonating in significant ways with contemporary Uganda. Deliberations both within the colonial hierarchy, and between the state and missionary societies in the colonial era laid the foundations for many of the debates regarding the relationship between the state and churches (Hansen 1984), but in the years leading up to independence, new actors, namely emerging political parties, added new ingredients to earlier debates; launched in different parts of Uganda in the 1950s, these were largely under the leadership of people trained in Protestant schools (Leys 1967). By 1960, the various rival parties merged to form the Uganda People’s Congress (UPC). The Catholic Church was deeply concerned by the nationalist policies of these early parties, particularly their connections to international socialism and atheism (Gingyera-Pinycwa 1976; Ward 2005), and its response was to establish the Democratic Party (DP), largely built on the model of European Christian Democracy. Although both the DP and the UPC parties sought to portray themselves as representing the interests of all Ugandans regardless of their religiosity, by the time of independence in 1962, the DP was popularly known as Dini ya Papa (religion of the Pope), and the Uganda People’s Congress (UPC) as the United Protestants of Canterbury (Ward 2005, 112; Welbourn 1965, 18-20).

The key issues for both of these parties in pre-independence years related to the form Uganda should adopt as it approached independence. The UPC advocated a strong nationalist stance which included greater independence from missionary-established churches. At the local level, it lobbied for limiting the influence of the colonially endorsed chiefs’ powers over communities. For the Catholic Church, the UPC represented the threat of atheist communism, and it was sorely concerned about the Church’s future should the UPC gain power.

In Acholiland, the most important arena for articulating Catholic views in these debates was the local Catholic print media. The Verona missionaries published two newspapers on their own printing press both with substantial readership: in 1952 the bi-monthly Luo-language Lobo Mewa (‘Our Land’) had a circulation of 12,000, while the monthly English-language ‘Leadership’ magazine, which the Comboni missionaries still publish today, had a circulation of 8,000 (Gingyera-Pinycwa 1976, 175). The papers were distributed mainly through schools, whence they spread to teachers’ and students’ villages. These schools were a point of contention between the DP and UPC. Schools had been fundamental to the missionaries’ aim of nurturing
the Acholi to what they perceived as spiritual, moral, and political maturity, and the
departure of the colonial authorities, with whom missionaries had negotiated to date,
would render political parties the key to their continued control. Generating support
for a loyally Catholic DP was thus essential for the Church.

Debates over schools were linked to debates over the distribution of government
employment in interesting ways. The Catholic Lobo Mewa made this point very clearly
in 1958:

The dispute concerning religion in Uganda is not over doctrinal differences but
about JOBS AND SCHOLARSHIP. The Catholics feel aggrieved and wonder
why such important posts like that of county chiefs, or subcountry chief, and
others are held by Protestants. (Quoted in Gingyera-Pinyeza 1976, 52; 
capitalised in original)

Kassimir even argues that the DP’s ‘raison d’être was far more for the social mobility
of lay Catholics than the promotion of a Christian world view or the protection of
church privileges’ (1998, 64). While Catholics argued that Protestants were gaining
access to all the important jobs because of systemic government preference,
Protestants largely claimed that their success was the outcome of a specific mentality
instilled in them by their education. They declared that young Protestants were being
coached towards personal initiative and leadership, as opposed to the docility and
obedience typical of those receiving a Catholic education (for a preferentiality
argument, see Karugire 1980, 135–36; for a mentality argument, see Welbourn 1965,
9–10, 13–15).

Arguments about denominational abilities and preferential treatment intertwined
from the beginning with issues of ethnicity and locality. As elsewhere, the British
colonial government in Uganda categorized and analysed its colonial subjects as
representatives of distinct tribes even in areas where no such neat categorical
identifications had previously existed (Mamdani 1996). The institutions of local
colonial government were designed along ethnic lines, which fostered the bolstering
and eventual politicisation of ethnic identities. While this served colonial interests in
that entrenched divisions between different groups within the colonies hindered the
spread of anti-colonial nationalist protests, it also created the basis for divided polities
at independence (Karugire 1996; Laruni 2015).

As shown by, for instance, Laruni (2015) and Finnström (2008), the ethnic
divisions laid down in Uganda during the early decades of colonialism became ever
more entrenched during the run-up to the country’s independence. Divisions between
the North and the South of the country, which were to become the fuel of bitter
political conflict for years to come, were constructed not only through ethnically
stereotyping colonial rhetoric, but through the colonial government’s allocation of
investments. The British had established relations with the Buganda kingdom over a
quarter of a century before instituting colonial rule in northern Uganda, and viewed it
as an atypically ‘developed’ and ‘mature’ African kingdom; consequently Buganda received the bulk of colonial investment in manufacturing industries and educational facilities. Areas like East Acholiland (including Kitgum), which were geographically far from the centre of colonial power, suffered from a lack of investments in both public services and industrial development, and from constricted access to markets (Ocitti 1966). With few other employment opportunities, Northerners like the Acholi and the Langi – who were on average taller than their southern and western counterparts, and who had furthermore been branded in early colonial literature as ‘warlike’ – were seen as a suitable reserve for military recruitment. In the run-up to independence, and in its early years, the division between a North that felt left out and lagging behind, and a South that felt justified in its sense of superiority over the North, became further entrenched. On the other hand, the military experience numerous Acholi and Langi soldiers had gained through their service in the King’s African Rifles facilitated a desire for influence among ‘Northerners’ (Leys 1967, 17-18).

Two further points regarding the inter-linkages of locality, religion, and state need to be made before moving on from the eve to the day of independence. First of all, ethnicity as such was not the only meaningful category of largely place-based identification that still influences patterns of political and religious competition or political imagination in present-day Kitgum. Another category of importance cuts across Acholiland and relates to the division of East and West Acholi. As the previous chapter outlined, both the colonial government and missionary organisations established themselves in and around Gulu, in West Acholi, before they penetrated the East. Furthermore, a West Acholi chiefdom, Payira, was recognised by the colonial establishment as the primary leader of the Acholi, and its chief was granted the title of paramount chief. This East-West division has prevailed in Acholiland ever since the early days of colonialism, influencing power struggles within political parties and among Acholi chiefdoms and clans, as well as in the churches. In sum, neither religion, nor ethnicity, nor locality, nor political ideology, can be offered as a single causal explanation for societal processes in Acholiland or more generally in Uganda. Rather, religion, ethnicity, locality, and politics intertwine in complex ways that call for detailed empirical analysis.

What is noteworthy is that these complex ethnic and regional dynamics were inseparably entangled with denominational politics. While largely seen as a northern party, the UPC was also firmly associated with the Protestant Church; on the other hand, although the leader of the Democratic Party was a Muganda, many Baganda, who were predominantly Protestant, found it difficult to support him and opted rather to support the exclusively Baganda party Kabaka Yekka, which had a more Protestant orientation. On a local level, ethnicity and locality and religion also intermeshed: for instance, certain localities within northern Uganda, such as Kalongo in Eastern Acholiland, the site of a large Verona mission, became regional strongholds of the DP. As Leys (1967) notes, while certain villages and towns were predominantly
DP or UPC, the more dominant pattern was that party and religious allegiances cut across and caused division within villages, clans, and families.

**Religion, locality, and ‘nation-building’ in independent Uganda**

The predominantly Catholic DP emerged as the winner of the elections held in Uganda’s first Constitutional Conference in March 1962, and its leader Ben Kiwanuka became prime minister of the National Assembly. In new elections held only a month later, however, the Uganda People’s Congress (UPC), led by Milton Obote, and the party representing the Buganda Kingdom, Kabaka Yekka (KY), formed an alliance and won the vote, meaning that Uganda gained full independence on October 9th 1962 with Milton Obote as its prime minister. Many Catholics interpreted the alliance of the two Protestant-dominated parties in the second elections of 1962 as a concerted action against Catholics, and the event served to further entrench the Protestant-Catholic division.

By the late 1960s, the fears Catholics had aired in the pre-independence years concerning the socialist nationalism of the UPC proved legitimate. In events that many of my elderly Catholic informants saw as the beginning of a deterioration in education in Uganda, Obote’s government nationalised schools, leaving their founding bodies only nominal recognition and influence in their administration. Despite the nationalisation process, Catholic missions continued to invest heavily in keeping up the standard of the schools they had founded and opening new ones, as they still do today. Because government spending on schools decreased in the tumultuous decades that followed, Catholics managed in the long run to retain the upper hand in education in Uganda (Ward 2005, 105).

At the time, however, the nationalisation of schools led Catholics to resent Obote, while serious disputes between Protestants of different ethnicities decreased support for Obote even among his own denominational ranks (Ward 2005). Ultimately he emerged as a president who was strongly identified with the ‘North’, but the regional allegiance among ‘Northerners’ was tenuous, and ethnic divisions such as those between the Acholi and the neighbouring Langi were often manipulated by political contestants. As Laruni (2015) describes, political mobilisation occurred at a largely local level, whereby local grievances were used to generate support for the national aspirations of the political parties. The increasing de facto ethnornationalism contrasted with a pervasive rhetoric of nationalist anti-tribalism, eventually leading to the breakdown of the state during Obote’s presidency (ibid.), while the repression of political parties and Obote’s increasingly authoritarian measures also led to a growing dissatisfaction among his own ranks.

In 1971, parts of the military, which had formed a powerful and well-endowed elite in post-independence Uganda, ousted Obote under the lead of General Idi Amin (Lofchie 1972). Amin was the first and, to date, the only Muslim to have led the country, but while he wilfully targeted many Christians and banned all but the three
older Christian Churches (Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox), a shared faith did not spare Muslims who opposed him (Ward 2005). The Acholi, who had been the military backbone of Obote’s regime, were the targets of particularly violent vengeance under Idi Amin’s presidency. One of his most prominent victims was the Protestant Archbishop of Uganda, Rwanda, and Bogo Zaire, Janani Luwum, who died at Amin’s hands in 1977. Luwum had taken a vocal stand against the dictator’s increasing use of arbitrary violence to kill and scare supposed opponents, but the archbishop’s arrest, which was followed by his death in a thinly disguised accident, was formally made on grounds of his claimed involvement in a plot to kill Amin and reinstate Obote (Ward 2005, 114-15).

In 1979, Amin was ousted by the Uganda National Liberation Army (UNLA), which united numerous armed groups under Obote’s lead in an attack on Amin launched from neighbouring Tanzania. Two chaotic years followed, during which wanton violence against civilians and political opponents from different factions almost equalled the worst of the Amin years. In 1980, Obote returned to presidency through a rigged election that should in fact have been won by the DP (Kasfir 1998, 49). One of those displeased with Obote’s presidency was the Western Ugandan, Munyankole Yoweri Museveni, who had fallen out with both the UPC and the DP, and unsuccessfully contested the presidency in the 1980 elections. Soon after Obote came back to power, Museveni, with a group of Ugandans and Rwandans calling itself the National Resistance Army (NRA), launched a rebellion known as the Bush War against Obote’s UNLA. Obote’s own troops were again becoming disgruntled and, in 1985, an Acholi UNLA officer, Tito Okello, ousted Obote. Okello invited the numerous armed groups operating in Uganda at the time, the most influential of which was Museveni’s NRA, to peace talks in Nairobi. A peace agreement was reached but never implemented, and a month after its signing Museveni overran Okello and walked into Kampala, where he has held power ever since.

Ethnically targeted state violence during the rules of Obote, Amin, Obote again, and later Museveni, has put national churches in an awkward situation, since they themselves cut across all the ethnic alliances that have divided the regimes of individual presidents from their opponents. Ward (1991) argues that the extremity of violence during the first post-independence decades to some extent brought the historically antagonistic churches closer to each other, but even when bishops attempted to speak on behalf of the nation or a national church during this time, they could not escape accusations of ethnic bias (Ward 2005). While preferential treatment by the ruling power of one church could trigger the animosity of another, the same was also true within churches: the statements of individual religious leaders were easily framed as ethnically motivated, leading to a kind of internal handicap that kept churches from speaking out strongly on sensitive political issues. This was made the more complete by threats of material dispossession of the churches, and by the threat of violence and death against those who dared reprimand leaders for their abuses of
power (Prouet 1980). Thus through much of the tumultuous early period of Uganda’s independence, the churches played a highly circumscribed and cautious role in Ugandan politics. As the Catholic theologians Waliggo, Katongole, and Ssettuuma (2013) show, shortly after Uganda’s independence the Ugandan Catholic hierarchy adopted silence as a survival strategy, issuing not a single pastoral letter between 1962 and 1979, when Amin was overthrown. Yet through their grassroots actions – such as arranging burials for prominent victims of violence – the churches were increasingly ‘cast in the role of the opposition’ (Prouet 1980, 21). Before analysing the trajectories of church-state relations under the NRM regime, I briefly discuss some of the ways in which long-term historical patterns appear in contemporary debates and discussions about churches and politics in Kitgum.

Remnants of past patterns in the present

The first point to be made concerns the prevalence of ethnicity and locality as points of identification. The question of ethnicity will arise repeatedly in the following chapters as well as towards the end of this one, but a point to be made separately here concerns the division, mentioned above, between West and East Acholi. This divide continues to have contemporary relevance, as can be seen, for instance, within the Catholic Church in Acholiland. The Verona missionaries, who in addition to their mission station in Kitgum established a vibrant mission and hospital in Kalongo, east of Kitgum, came to dominate the eastern part of Acholi to a greater extent than they did the West. To this day, a number of important Catholic leaders in Acholi, many of whom have been raised to their positions of leadership through some level of patronage from Comboni missionaries, are from East Acholi. This has triggered complaints about preferential treatment among younger priests, particularly those from West Acholi. The goal of East Acholi priests to separate their half of Acholi from the Diocese of northern Uganda, currently comprising both East and West Acholi, and the snail’s pace at which the process has moved in recent years, also reflect this age-old division. As I describe in Chapter Nine, similar intra-Acholi disputes have also profoundly influenced the Protestant Church in Kitgum, with certain parties within the CoU Diocese of Kitgum insisting that the diocese should be split in half, with Kigum and Lamwo districts in one diocese, and Pader and Agago in the other.38

Interestingly, a second point that remains unchanged is the extent to which the Protestant / Catholic divide continues to structure people’s perceptions of politics. Although the UPC and the DP constitute only a tiny minority in the present political dispensation (after the 2016 elections, the DP hold 10 and the UPC 12 out of altogether 375 seats in parliament), the same debates that pitted these parties against

38 Mika Vähikangas (personal communication) notes similar patterns in Tanzania, where institutional fragmentation along ethnic lines within the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Tanzania (ELCT), one of the country’s largest churches, has been followed by demands to splinter dioceses even further at a sub-ethnic, e.g. clan level.
each other in years prior to and following Uganda’s independence - over government jobs, access to positions of authority, and denominational schools - continue to sour relations between the Catholic and Protestant Church in contemporary Kitgum, and were commonly raised by my Catholic and Protestant informants in our discussions.

For instance, fifty years after the elections in which Kiwanuka lost to Obote, both young and old Catholics in Kitgum still refer to Kiwanuka’s defeat as an indication of the deliberate sidelining of Catholics and the systemic preference of Protestants entrenched in Ugandan institutions, while Protestant informants use the incident to illustrate the intrinsic tendency of Protestants to be both willing and able to adopt positions of authority. Many such stereotypes, which Welbourn (1965) describes as already common in the 1960s, reflect genuine differences between the styles and content of church education in Uganda; moreover, they have remained prevalent and were evoked in almost every discussion I had about mainline churches and politics during my fieldwork. A similar continuity characterises claims that one religious group is being preferentially treated over another in employment. The only difference between the old debates and those of today is that contemporary disputes reach beyond the Catholic / Protestant divide, as increasing number of Pentecostal-Charismatic Christians are also involved in district leadership and party politics.

Particularly for elderly informants, these stereotypical perceptions by Protestants and Catholics of the other group were at times meshed together with broader speculations pertaining to the division between the two mainline churches. Many of those I spoke with about early UPC / DP politics, for instance, suspected that the British, who had always supported the Protestant CMS over Catholic missionaries, had had a hand in replacing Kiwanuka with Obote in the second of the 1962 elections. A notable number of my Catholic informants, including many young ones, claimed that some kind of bigger geopolitical game must still be in play, for, as the argument went, how else could one explain that a Catholic had never become president despite Catholics having always been the majority? Similar conspiracy speculations lingered among Protestants. The most striking example of this was provided by one highly educated elderly Protestant man who spent a great deal of time furnishing me with details purporting to prove that the Comboni missionaries' actions in contemporary Kitgum, such as the building of new chapels, were all part of a bigger plot whereby the Catholic Church, with Italy behind it, was preparing to colonise Uganda.

While these are extreme cases, what is important to note is that the division between Catholics and Protestants is something many Acholi recognise and continue to identify with, despite the radical shifts in both the political and the religious scene in Uganda in recent decades - this may, in part, be due to the closer linkages between the Catholic Church and the DP in the North as compared to other parts of the country (Kassimir 1998, 67). That said, what is equally important is that a notable generational shift in political thinking is currently taking place. Every time Uganda
goes to vote, the proportion of voters who have experienced, or have memory of, politics prior to the NRM grows smaller – the ‘Museveni babies’ now make up 78% of the population (see Reuss and Titeca 2017). Political debates framed around the Protestant / Catholic divide are thus increasingly debates of the older, outgoing generations of politically active citizens. A Protestant man once made this clear to me when we were discussing what he thought about the relationship of church and politics. When he explained that Catholics were DP, and Protestants UPC, I asked him what that made the NRM. He answered: ‘They are the Pentecostals. And some Protestants, and all those Catholics who love their stomach more than they do even their country’ (interview, April 2013). It is to the momentous shift in Ugandan politics and Ugandans’ perceptions of politics at the coming to power of Museveni’s NRM to which we now turn.

The ‘no-party’ system and changing parameters of church-state relations

One of the key goals of Museveni’s National Resistance Army, and the subsequent ‘no-party movement regime’ of the NRM, was to counter ethnic and religious divisions in the country. Indeed, for a long time the Movement system was lauded for just that, both by many of the Movement’s supporters in Uganda, particularly in those areas that had been hit worst by the violence of Obote and Amin, as well as by donors and political analysts (Carbone 2008a; Hauser 1999; Kasfir 1998; Mwenda and Tangri 2005). After years of widespread state-perpetrated violence under Amin and particularly the second of the Obote regimes, much of it characterised by and leading to increasingly politicised ethnicity, Museveni’s insistence on breaking down divisions and building a new system for Uganda seemed a turn for the better.

Museveni’s coming to power also led to substantial changes in the religious field. The new regime meant an end to the by now well-established form of the Ugandan political system, with Catholics and Protestants on largely opposite sides of the party line. By the time parties were again allowed, after a referendum in 2005, the DP and the UPC came back considerably weakened. By this point, many Catholic and Protestant politicians had spent years gaining influence within the NRM system, and had become staunch supporters of the Movement. Hence, it was not from the old league of UPC and DP politicians that the most serious opposition to the NRM arose, but from within the ranks of the NRM, as became clear when the Forum for Democratic Change, under the leadership of Museveni’s former ally, Kizza Besigye, took a leading role in Uganda’s political opposition.

Although Museveni himself came from a Protestant Balokole-revival background, the dismantling of political parties under the ‘no-party movement system’ initially kept

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39 Parts of this section draw on a literature review I have co-authored with Jimmy Spire Ssentongo for a joint article, and is used here with Dr. Ssentongo’s kind permission.
both the older churches at arm’s length from State House (Gifford 1998; Ward 2005). With time, the NRM stance on churches softened so that, as Ward argues, ‘gradually both Museveni and the Movement have recognized that the churches are such a prominent part of the fabric of Ugandan life that they cannot be ignored or sidelined’ (Ward 2005, 116). Ward also notes that Museveni’s takeover resulted in a notable improvement for Catholics who, while adamant supporters of the return of multiparty politics during the ‘no-party movement system’, still had more political space than they had ever had under the UPC (see also Twesigye 2010, 210-13). Under the NRM, those clerics who have not openly opposed the government have found it relatively easy to operate without intervention or restraint, and those with large followings have also attracted state funding and presidential visits.

Recently, political statements by clerics have triggered reminders that religion should not interfere with politics, while, somewhat paradoxically, religious leaders inclined towards the NRM have been appointed by the president to political positions (see Alava and Ssentongo 2016 for more details).40 From the perspective of the older churches, one of the most considerable changes to have occurred in Ugandan society since Museveni’s coming to power in 1986 has been the proliferation and growth of Pentecostal-Charismatic churches. These not only provide the older churches with stiff competition in the religious market, they have also altered the tone of political debate in the country, creating what Bompani and Brown (2014) refer to as a Pentecostalised public sphere. National-level analyses of the impact of the NRM on religion and politics in Uganda must, however, be qualified with analysis of the enormous regional differences.

Churches and the northern Ugandan war

Religion, politics, and ethnicity were all involved and evoked when war broke out in northern Uganda in response to Museveni’s takeover and the violent measures his NRA forces imposed on Acholi UNLA soldiers and citizens. Both Joseph Kony’s Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA), and its predecessor, Alice Lakwena’s Holy Spirit Mobile Forces (HSMF), contained Christian references in their names, and both Kony and Lakwena were raised Catholic. Both movements also incorporated elements of Christian cosmology and tradition with selected elements of Acholi clan practice, military strategy, and increasingly violent mechanisms for controlling their own forces and the civilians on whose behalf they claimed to be fighting. In the following, I do not aim to provide an overview of the LRA or the HSMF or their relation to Christianity. To do so would be beyond the scope of this brief subsection, as demonstrated in the nuanced analyses of Behrend (1999) on the HSMF and

40 This pattern has been quite typical for church-state relations in Eastern Africa; for instance, Westerlund (1980) described Nyerere’s Ujamaa policy towards religion as contradictory, in that while Nyerere encouraged Tanzanian religious leaders to wield influence in certain sectors of society, in others he fervently demanded that religion be kept at a distance from the political arena.
Finnström (2008) and others (Titeca 2010; Van Acker 2004) on the LRA. What I wish briefly to outline are issues that emerged during my fieldwork as relevant aspects of the role and position of churches during the war, some of which also emerge from Ward’s (2001) and Whitmore’s (2010b) analyses on the subject.

The first point to be made is that the churches were present in Acholiland in a way no other organisations were. During times of great insecurity, churches were, sometimes for years on end, the only non-military institutions whose staff actually stayed in their posts. As Kevin Ward argued in 2001,

The churches have means of access to people that the government does not. Church leaders and traditional leaders in the community often overlap. The church not so much ‘represents’ local opinion as provides a channel by which local opinion can express itself. (ibid., 201)

While both churches and their members suffered from the violence perpetrated by the warring parties, the war affected the two churches in different ways. Because of their considerable resources, Catholic mission stations were repeatedly raided by the rebels, yet the missions also provided priests and nuns with a modicum of protection and physical comfort, something some Catholic priests I spoke with felt had distanced them from the true suffering of those in the worst situations of the war. Here they compared themselves to the Protestant clerics, many of whom lived with their parishioners in the displacement camps with their families. Many of the priests I spoke with described the intense pressure they were under during the war: looked upon as authorities in the absence of many others, clergy were turned to for advice, protection and assistance, even when they themselves were scared, and under considerable stress. Yet many made the choice to stay in insecure areas with their parishioners even when they were offered the chance of moving somewhere safer (see Obol 2012 for one Catholic priest’s account of the war).

Churches were considered unreliable both by the government, and by the rebels. On the side of the rebels, the relationship appears to have been somewhat contradictory. As Ward writes, ‘Kony regarded pastors and priests, and school teachers ... as representatives of a southern-based ‘government’ and its values; church congregations provided opportunity for dissemination of government propaganda’ (2001, 200). Based on his discussions with a Protestant reverend in Kitgum in the early 1990s, Ward (ibid., 213-215) also suggests that rebels considered the Protestant Church, particularly in its charismatic revival form, a spiritual opponent, which could in certain situations act to prohibit rebel attacks. Yet my informants also pointed out that there was a certain sense of understanding and respect on the part of the rebels towards the churches. The government’s attitude to the churches was equally ambivalent. In Ward’s (ibid.) view, the NRM considered the Protestant Church dubious due to its close relationship with the Obote regime. While Ward (ibid., 197) suggests this led the government to consider the Catholic Church a more credible
commentator on the war, my Catholic informants highlighted that the willingness of church hospitals to provide health services to anyone who was wounded, including the rebels; the international connections of foreign missionaries; the historical identification of many Comboni missionaries as opposition-minded agitators; and certain priests’ attempts to remain in contact with the rebels in order to persuade them to peace talks rendered the Catholic Church highly suspect in the eyes of the government. The situation also evolved as the war dragged on; with the exception of individual, staunchly anti-NRM clergy like Bishop Ochola, the Protestant Church in Kitgum has come to be more closely identified with the NRM than the Catholic.

Image 12. Thousands of buildings were destroyed or abandoned during the war, among them churches and schools. In 2006, an employee of the NGO where I was interning taught me to read the landscape as we drove at break-neck speed through rural Eastern Acholi, eager to get back to the safety of town before nightfall: ‘Under every mango tree there was a home.’ This picture of the church of the Pentecostal Assemblies of God in Kitgum Matidi, abandoned halfway through construction, due to insecurity, was taken out of the car window on one of those trips.

Although it is difficult to gain a clear picture of the alliances and sympathies between the churches and the warring parties – these fluctuated, and were often between individuals rather than institutions as such – what is clear is that both mainline churches were hit hard by the war. The rebels repeatedly looted mission stations and churches, at times purposefully destroying sacred objects such as the tabernacle, and both the LRM/A and the UPDF used church buildings as their bases. Numerous Protestant and Catholic Acholi priests and catechists as well as Catholic missionaries died during the war, as shown also in accounts by Whitmore (2010b), Ward (2001),
and Soto (2009). Some of these died in rebel ambushes, and some in what my informants suspected were in fact ambushes perpetrated by the government which were purposefully camouflaged as rebel acts (see also Obol 2012, 108). Any acts of violence or retaliation could be blamed on the rebels, making it risky for priests to engage in public criticism, for instance, in cases of corruption (see also ibid., 130). Many of my informants in Kitgum recounted incidents where they suspected that the rebels were blamed merely as a smokescreen for someone else acting out on old grudges. Both Catholic and Protestant clergy were also harassed by state security officials, particularly those who were actively involved in peace negotiations, and at least one Comboni missionary was deported on the grounds of suspected rebel collaboration (see also Soto 2009).

Based on my discussions of the latter accusations with Comboni missionaries and Acholi priests, and with Protestant clergy, I believe that the same process that characterised the attitudes of perhaps a majority of the Acholi towards the LRM/A and the government also characterised the shift in attitudes of the local churches and their staff. When the NRM grabbed power in 1986 and started perpetrating large-scale violence in the North, almost everyone in Acholi supported the groups that rose up to defend the Acholi against the NRM onslaught – including churches in the region. This support was political, but it may also have had varying degrees of religious tones to it: according to Behrend (1999) in the early phase of Alice Lakwena’s mobilisation, Protestant reverends had used her church for their services, whereas Allen (1991, 393) notes that some Catholic sisters believed that Alice might be a genuine prophet. Later, as the rebels’ violence was turned increasingly on civilians, attitudes towards the rebels became ambivalent. There were individual clerics in both churches with close personal or family connections to people working for the government or serving in the military who were more likely to adopt pro-government stances, even during the war, than colleagues holding more rigidly anti-NRM views. And, certainly, similar ties would have existed between clerics and rebels; for instance, I was sometimes reminded by elderly priests that by the time the rebel ranks were growing as the result of abductions, many of the rebels were their former students or altar boys. Ultimately, however, when both the government and the rebels were killing and violating their people, it was impossible for most clergy to support either the LRM/A or Museveni.

A second point relates to the specifically ethnic angle of the war, and the notable extent to which mainline churches in Acholi were alone in encountering the suffering the war was causing. The national leadership of both mainline churches was slow to comment on the war in a vocal way. For instance, although Ward (2001, 208) notes that Catholic Cardinal Wamala had in 1996 pleaded that Kony stop the violence, it was only in 2004 that the Catholic hierarchy issued a clearly phrased pastoral letter on the matter (Uganda Episcopal Conference 2004). Somewhat symptomatically, three non-Acholi Catholic scholars claim in their review of the Episcopal Council’s pastoral letters that the 1999 pastoral letter was the first to address the northern war, but this
is a rather far-reaching claim (see Waliggo, Katongole, and Ssettuuma 2013). The vaguely phrased letter is written to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Declaration of Human Rights, and states that respect for human rights is the beginning of peace. The letter calls upon the government and all parties engaged in violence to commit themselves to peace, and expresses an utterly depoliticised solidarity with those living in the midst of war.\footnote{The letter reads: ‘To all people of God in Uganda who suffer due to war... Never think for a moment that you are not dear to our hearts. Never think we ever forget you in your sufferings. We pray for you always. We know what you are going through. We know what you have lost and are still losing, beginning from your dear ones to property. Our consolation can never be sufficient. We call upon God, to be with you, to show you how much He still loves and cares for you. Continue to trust Him and cooperate with Him in the search for peace. We call on all our fellow Christians and people of goodwill to show generosity, through donation of the necessary items for life, to all those who suffer.’ (Uganda Episcopal Conference 1999)}

One Acholi priest recounted to me that colleagues from Southern Uganda had openly declared to him that the war in the North was a strictly northern problem on which the Catholic Church as a national body had no reason to take a stand. Whereas Protestant leaders within northern Uganda took an active role in political advocacy over the war (see also J. Taylor 2005), outside of Acholi the Church of Uganda maintained a fairly quiet stance, and remained noncommittal on the subject – an exception Ward notes was a conference of northern CoU bishops in 1998, which was attended by the bishop of Luwero Diocese (2001, 208-209). As Ward describes elsewhere, in comparison to the Catholic Church the CoU has exert[ed] a more discrete, behind the scenes, influence in public affairs, reflecting both their traditional sense of being part and parcel of the institutions of the state, and their continued consciousness of the fragility of their own unity on political issues (Ward 2005, 116).

In Chapter Eight, I provide a detailed analysis of the theology and practical steps taken to promote peace by leaders of the mainline churches in Acholi. For now, I will summarise what I argue is the notably violent way in which relations between churches and the NRM state are configured in contemporary Uganda.

**Violent imaginaries of church-state relations in Museveni’s Uganda**

The extent to which violence underpins political imaginaries in Museveni’s Uganda is brought into sharp relief in a speech made by the president in 2010 in which he elaborates his view of the division between church, state, and tradition. My reconstruction of what the president said is based on an initial report of the speech in the opposition-minded The Observer newspaper, critical responses to this report, and a copy of the speech, claimed to be verbatim, published after some weeks of debate in the same newspaper (Ekitibwa Kya Buganda 2010; The Observer 2010; Sekika 2010).
Museveni began the speech, given during a celebration of the restoration of the Bunyoro kingdom, by explaining that the National Resistance Movement had restored traditional kingdoms because the latter had now realised that leadership could not only be passed from father to child, but also that there was another path to power: elections. This is highly ironic given that Museveni came to power on the backs of his troops, and in light of the extent to which Museveni’s electoral victories have been bolstered by security forces (see for instance Titeca and Onyango 2012). Museveni continued:

You Banyoro call it olubimbi. When people are in the garden digging, each one uses a hoe to till their portion (olubimbi). There will be no problem if each concentrates on their portion. Now, if you suddenly jump into my lubimbi, I [might] cut your head and there would be no case [to answer]. When they (authorities) come to investigate, they will ask: ‘How was his head cut?’ [The answer will be], ‘He crossed from his lubimbi to mine and I wasn’t seeing him. I was digging and he suddenly appeared from there.’ Now, mature people who know what to do can handle this matter well.

The president then explained why, although he was a Christian, it was not his place to baptise anyone. When he went to church, he had only to remain humbly silent and allow the officiating priest to place the bread in his mouth at communion. Finally, the president thanked those traditional leaders who had not transgressed the boundaries of their lubimbi. This was important, because, as the president stated, ‘the problems we had in the past, in the 1960s, resulted from people moving from their lubimbi’ (ibid.). Almost a decade earlier, a Catholic priest had written an opinion piece about an earlier round of comments Museveni had made on the gardening plots of churches and the state in which he claims:

Our political leaders are so inconsistent on issues between Church and State that it is impossible to rely on them. For them the Church is right when its leaders support them but the moment the Church speaks out in disagreement, then it is meddling into politics. It is then told to stay out and concentrate on spiritual affairs. (Kanyike 2003)

As my analysis in the following chapters demonstrates, Kanyike offers a fair characterisation of the parameters of the negotiation over state-church relations in Museveni’s Uganda up till today (see also Alava and Ssengongo 2016). In order to steer churches into silence and acquiescence, the state deploys both the carrot and the stick, exemplified most clearly by the indirect threat of decapitation quoted from the president’s speech above. This insight provides the basic setting in which the relationships between the NRM state and churches can be analysed in Uganda.

To conclude the analysis thus far, this chapter has argued, first, that Uganda is no longer divided along denominational lines in the same way that it was at independence. Rather, the country is increasingly divided between a West Ugandan
and Kampala-based elite, currently personified by President Museveni and those who oppose him. Yet, despite the notable changes in the political dispensation of the past thirty years, remnants of the Protestant / Catholic political divide still litter political commentary and competition in northern Uganda today. Second, I have argued that, in northern Uganda, the relationships between churches and politics, and between the state and individual churches, are configured against particular historical trajectories of violence and warfare which influence both the churches, and the state’s perceptions of churches, in notable ways.

In anticipation of Chapter Five, which shifts from analysis focusing largely on the institutional and generalised level to description of the everyday in post-war Kitgum, the remainder of this chapter argues for hesitance in narrating atrocity.

**Muting the war in northern Uganda**

In the notes I had written for the final part of Chapter Four, I advised myself ‘to describe the war in terms of the political big picture in a way that 1) shows the relationship between war and the churches, and 2) contextualizes what will be said in future chapters’. Whenever I read them, these instructions stifled my desire or ability to write a word. Over the years spent working on this thesis, the description of the war has been something I have kept putting off. In my outline plans, the section ‘introducing the war’ kept being shuffled from one chapter to another, and I seemed unable to get beyond preliminary jottings on the subject. Somehow, a thesis about northern Uganda seemed to call for a more or less chronological account of the LRM/A war, complete with a dissection of the national, regional, and global reaches of its political economy, and an overview of the statistics, facts, and key interpretations: how many were abducted, how many died, in whose hands, why. In the very last stretches of writing, once I realised I simply had to give the non-Acholi-expert reader something to go on, a section somewhat like this emerged for use in Chapter One. But the pages of text that would go deeper – that discussed the war in more detail, that gave an outline of what went on during twenty years of war in Kitgum – refused to emerge; the best of my many attempts ending in capitalised exasperation: ‘NOT LIKE THIS!’

In the following chapter, I write about the difficulty of describing a place, and delineate Kitgum as a town characterized by silences and their occasional breakings, by an oscillation between fear and hope. In sum, I write of Kitgum as a town emerging from war. But how should one write about the war itself?

Describing the impossibility of capturing experience in words, Michael Taussig has written:

> It is as if writing—the epitome of consciousness—obliterates reality, pushing it further and further out of reach ... How tragic, then, that each word you write down changes from a flower into a toad. Each word seems to multiply the
distance between you and what the word was supposed to be about. (Taussig 2011, 19)

Taussig recounts a story he heard from an unnamed anthropologist. The anthropologist had asked his informants to tell him about atrocities they had experienced during the rubber boom in Colombia. One of the informants had declared that only sorcerers wanted to know about such things, and that they used such stories for evil.

True, false, or in between, this story has weighed on me to the present, for it suggests that as regards atrocity there is wisdom in muteness and that to bear witness to atrocity requires particular measures and conditions that could indeed be regarded as magical. (Taussig 2011, 135)

Have I the magical measures required to bear witness to the atrocity that was the northern Ugandan war? The next chapter is my attempt to do so, by way not of description of events, but by writing backward in time, from the present of my fieldwork encounters. But I cannot muster the magic it would take to write an account of the 'bare facts of the war' that I have for long believed a thesis on northern Uganda should have: a detached overview, a bird’s eye view, written from so high above that the details merge into clear patterns. ‘The big picture’.

I choose to believe that this is the time when there is, in Taussig’s words, ‘wisdom in muteness’. I paste together almost all that I have written in earlier drafts of this chapter’s final section, which sought to narrate the war that began in Acholiland in 1986, delete most of it, and save only this:

‘It was a confusing time. Very difficult to analyse.’ The words of a German priest who lived at the Catholic mission in Kitgum through much of the war, capture something crucial about the northern Ugandan war. To speak of the war as a confusing time resonates with the expression used by the Acholi themselves, piny marac, or ‘bad surroundings’ (Finnström 2008) to describe the complex of war, humanitarian intervention, displacement, and local and international (in)justice mechanisms that engulfed the region for over two decades.

That, and only that, is what I am going to salvage from the planned final section of Chapter Four, which originally consisted of a rather neat narrative of the interplay of politics, churches, and war in postcolonial Uganda. This is partly because superbly insightful analyses have already been written about the northern Ugandan war, to which those with an interest in its intricacies may turn for more on the topic (see Chapter One for a brief review of the literature). But, much more importantly, it is because as much as this study is about post-war Kitgum, it is not a book about the war. As the following chapter demonstrates, experiences of the war and of all it had caused cut across everyday life in Kitgum, even though it was rarely spoken about. Yet, as this study as a whole aims to show, life after the war was not lived solely in reference to the war.
Much about Kitgum confounds the observer who has little or no experience of armed conflict because so much about the town and its ebbs and flows are in such stark contrast to the characterisations such observers tend to inscribe onto ‘post-conflict’ societies. I myself was most definitely one such, and coming to realise this was, for me personally, perhaps the most essential of all the lessons I have learned during the past six years. So to refuse to produce a detailed narrative of the northern Ugandan war in this thesis (other than the brief introduction provided in the Introduction) is, in part, an attempt to deny the reader the easy delusion of ‘grasping the big picture’ that I, and my informants, were also denied. Not writing the section I had instructed myself to write is a refusal to represent in neat, linear, and explanatory form something which my informants spoke of either vaguely or in a disorganized manner, or simply did not speak about at all.

There were a few people I knew in Kitgum who had succeeded in producing for themselves logical narratives about the war; narratives that seemed to convey a sometimes almost triumphant sense of ‘that nailed it’. But it is the overwhelming majority, those who spoke haltingly or didn’t speak at all, whom I now, as I write this, experience as kindred spirits. To a large degree, the following chapter, this entire thesis, is about them, and bears witness to the opportunity they accorded to me to dwell beside them in silence, with occasional glimpses at all it contained. This will have to suffice.
Chapter 5

Learning to listen to silence and confusion
Fieldwork in the aftermath of war

In this chapter, I describe Kitgum as a town emerging from decades of violent conflict. During my longest stretch of fieldwork, six years had passed since the war shifted territory to neighbouring countries, leaving northern Uganda free to breathe after almost twenty consecutive years of warfare. As I noted at the end of the previous chapter, and contrary to what I expected, the war was rarely on people’s lips, and the atmosphere of the town was characterised by a profound sense of normalcy and recovery. On paper, the transition from war to peace was largely complete; thousands of formerly abducted children and former LRM/A soldiers and wives had passed through integration centres, the large displacement camps had been closed, and people had moved back to their villages after years of forced displacement. Humanitarian agencies had largely been replaced by more development-oriented actors, and even these were in the process of scaling down and leaving.

Image 13. One of the few visible signs of the past war in Kitgum: a sign for the National Memory and Peace Documentation Centre, which some of my friends visited due to the fast Internet connection accessible in its library.
I could hardly recognise the Kitgum I was experiencing with my family as the same town I had visited in 2006. For instance, in 2006 the mental image I had of young Acholi men drew from the vacant stares of what I imagined to be former child soldiers gathered at street corners in Kitgum town, but in 2012-2013 this image was replaced by young men enthusiastically practicing old Protestant hymns in choir practice, lovingly taking care of their toddlers, or sitting in a DVD library exchanging views on the latest movies and discussing possible job openings. The town I had expected to encounter as one painfully recovering from war felt almost untouched by it.

It was only gradually that it dawned on me how little the war was spoken of. In the first few months of fieldwork in 2012, the majority of people I met, talked with informally, or interviewed, said nothing of the war unless I asked direct questions about it. For reasons I will discuss in this chapter, I usually did not. A shroud of silence concerning the war also lay over the pews in which I sat in the churches I was studying. The absence of stories of war became particularly pronounced when, after some three months of fieldwork, I started conducting interviews with young adults at the two churches I was studying. More often than not, these stories were told without any reference to anything related to the war I knew (or would later come to know) the interviewees had lived through. In part this related to my informants, many of whom had escaped some of the worst fates of war in the region. Most had not been abducted, and some had avoided even seeing live battle. But they had all heard it, lived in the midst of it, run for cover when sounds of shooting neared their side of the town. Everyone had been affected. As I came to eventually know, almost everyone I interacted with on a regular basis had lost a family member: a parent, a child, a sibling, or a cousin brother or sister, during the war. They all had family members or personally knew people who had ‘been with the rebels’, or who were somehow not coping well with their memories of war.42 But more often than not, these things were hidden in silence.

As it became clear to me that the war was a topic that many people wanted to avoid, I was puzzled how to proceed. I could not help but wonder what the silence could tell me. Were people not talking about the war only because I was not specifically asking about it, or were they actually not talking about it to each other either? If I had done fieldwork in a village outside of Kitgum, or somewhere other than the churches, would people have spoken more about the war? What was the ethical way to treat the silence as an ethnographer? Was there any way of studying it without breaking it, after which it would no longer be? Eventually, I decided to ask people I had come to know whether the silence concerning the war only extended to me, or whether people also did not talk to each other about the past. Through the

42 Furthermore, as the work of Ratele (2016) and Gqola (2016) on rape culture in South Africa shows, even those whose bodies are not directly touched cannot but be profoundly affected when violence cuts across society.
answers I received, and with insights gained from research on silence and trauma, my reading of the silence I met with in Kitgum has transformed considerably, not only during periods of fieldwork, but in the spaces in between, when I have read and re-read my fieldwork notes and interviews, explored memories, and returned to reflect on preconceptions I myself had about silence, trauma, and the need to talk in the aftermath of war.

The chapter has two aims, both of which are addressed in parallel throughout the coming pages. First, I seek to unravel the ways in which traces of war-time violence shape lives in northern Uganda in the present in order to lay the ground for analysis in subsequent chapters of how mainline Christian churches, as institutions and communities deeply embedded in Acholi society, have influenced the contours of political imagination in the region. I do so by drawing from studies on trauma and silence to describe the evolution of my own interpretations of the silence I encountered in Kitgum. Second, the chapter provides an overview of the methodological approach I have adopted in the study, and raises questions concerning the ethical and emotional implications of conducting fieldwork in a society recovering from war. I aim to show how a focus on embodiment and relationality can enable methodological insight and ethical guidelines for fieldwork in post-war contexts, but also how acceptance of the relationality and embodiment of the researcher brings into stark relief the limits of an ethics of encounter.

What might silence say (other than ‘trauma’)?

My initial ideas about why so few people talked about the war in Kitgum were influenced by culturally specific understandings of silence and trauma. They were also influenced by my close proximity to the churches I was studying, particularly the Catholic Church, at which I spent more time in the first half of my fieldwork than at the Protestant. Many of the priests with whom I discussed my observations of peoples’ silence concurred that people did not talk much about the war; for most of them, this silence was a cause for grave concern. It signalled a deep trauma, and what some of them termed people’s inability to ‘deal with’ what had happened. The priests’ concern for their non-talking parishioners was to a certain extent in line with their theological training, through which culturally specific notions of trauma and healing had been embedded into the mainstream vision of pastoral and psychosocial work in northern Uganda.43 This was evident in the plans for a new Catholic University to be launched

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43 An abundance of literature related to trauma, violence, and healing was available in the Catholic parishes where I had the opportunity to explore the parish bookshelves. This literature had been published, for instance, by the Uganda Episcopal Conference, the Archdiocese of Gulu, the Comboni Missionaries, and the Italian Catholic NGO AVSI, which had already had a significant presence in northern Uganda before the beginning of the war. Here there was a notable difference to the Church of Uganda, where I did not see similar materials either in the vestry of the Town Parish, in reverends’
in the region, where it was planned that course units on counselling would be integrated into all programs. As someone involved in the project explained to me, ‘Whether you’re working in IT or something else, the people you are dealing with will all have suffered trauma’ (Interview, 2013).

In many ways, the clerics were right to believe that everyone in northern Uganda has been affected by the war. In a survey conducted at one of the worst peaks of the war, 79 percent of respondents had witnessed torture, 40 percent had witnessed killing, 5 percent had been forced to physically harm someone, and 62 percent of the women interviewed had said they were thinking about committing suicide. During my fieldwork in 2012 and 2013, suicide cases were common in the region, and were generally attributed to repercussions of the war (see Kizza et al. 2012). Catholic priests had encountered thousands of people who came to them for the spiritual consolation and emotional relief offered by confession during and immediately after the war, and some still met regularly with former abductees who kept coming back to beg the priests to pray for their nightmares to end. Yet, although I was hearing these stories from the priests, all I myself witnessed in my first months of fieldwork was what to me appeared as normal, everyday life.

I thus interpreted silence through the prism of what I expected the silence to be suppressing. As the months passed, I became increasingly aware of what I took to be hints of deep, dark, and troubling currents underneath the silence and the surface of everyday life. The label I attached to all this was the same as those around me were attaching to it: trauma. As Fassin and Rechtman (2009) have argued, ‘trauma’ has become a marker of our time. Since the last decades of the 20th century, understandings of trauma have morphed in Western psychiatry, with the suspicion characteristic of many previous treatment regimens replaced by empathy for the victims of traumatic events. Although clinically trauma is understood as ‘overwhelming emotional experiences that cannot be coped with and integrated into the person’s existing inner world’ (Maček 2014b, 4), the notion’s travel across new genres of writing, clinical practice, and social advocacy have led to its incorporation into particular frames of moral politics: ‘As a tool of a politics of humanitarian testimony, trauma contributes to constructing new forms of political subjectification and new relations with the contemporary world’ (Fassin and Rechtman 2009, 216).

Today, individuals and communities – even nations – impacted by armed violence have almost automatically come to be interpreted as collectively traumatised (Hamber and Wilson 2002); so also northern Uganda. In Kitgum, adoption of the trauma narrative was particularly noticeable among those who had worked with humanitarian agencies during the war, at a time when humanitarian aid around the world was pervaded by an elaborate discourse that constructed ‘psychosocial support’ as the homes, or at the Diocese office. Neither had the Church of Uganda, as far as I could find, published material on such topics – they simply did not have the resources.
ultimate treatment for ‘trauma’ (Fassin and Rechtman 2009, 158). One impact of this discourse has been that silence in post-conflict situations is typically read as a pathological sign of untreated psychological wounds, although this view is increasingly critiqued. Drawing in part from roots engrained in Western culture through Catholic confession (Foucault 2012; Landry 2009), both advocacy and scholarly epistemologies of violence and trauma – whether the violence of the Holocaust, the Rwandan genocide, or Apartheid – commonly ‘prescribe public verbal articulation as the key to healing’ after traumatic events (Kidron 2009, 50; see for instance Tankink 2007 for an example from Uganda). Indeed, verbal articulation is essential to a number of different approaches to post-war ‘healing’, albeit taking different forms in, for instance, retributive or restorative justice: commemoration through memorial plaques or special services; truth-telling or peace and reconciliation commissions; or spiritual or psychological counselling. Looming behind much of the scholarship that supports these proscribed solutions to ‘trauma’ are Freudian views of the detrimental effects of repressed memories on the psyche, although newer approaches, less influenced by Freud, also underline the imperative of re-living through telling, and hence overcoming (Harnisch 2016). When informed by such views, silence may be read as a sign of pathological avoidance and repression, negative secrecy, or hegemonic silencing and subjugation (Kidron 2009).

Alternative views of silence that step beyond the imperative to speak out are, however, possible, and I argue often ethically justified. Thesauruses commonly define ‘silence’, first, as an absence of speech, but also as referring to a state of standing still and not speaking out of respect for someone deceased, or as referring to a moment reserved for prayer. Rather than silence implying a kind of failure, it can also be a culturally appropriate coping mechanism (Burnet 2012), and can be seen as a political act that is in fact full of agency (Das 2007; Eastmond and Selimovic 2012) – furthermore, as Marjaana Jauhola has shown, the audial space that silence creates may fill with alternative modes of expression (2016). The crucial point here is that these different views are not mutually exclusive. Rather, as I slowly came to realise during my fieldwork, different meanings of silence exist alongside each other and it is not necessarily easy – or even necessary – to pinpoint one specific reason for people’s hesitance to talk about the war.

At the same time as I was becoming aware of what I experienced as disturbing undercurrents of violence, trauma, and fear, I was also becoming aware of the sometimes pronounced, sometimes subtle ways in which they were addressed and dealt with in everyday lives. These types of undercurrents, both traumatic and healing, are often enveloped in a silence that Burnet describes as their ‘clinging[ ] to a normalized reality’ (2012, 78). A particularly poignant analysis of this double-sided nature of silence is found in Veena Das’ work, and her notion of a ‘descent into the ordinary’ (2007). In her ethnography, Das powerfully shows that the violence of significant events does not disappear with the absence of words but, rather, meanders
into and through the fabric of everyday social life. As past violence is incorporated into the ordinary, it may continue to wreak havoc on the victims of violence, leading the victims – both individually and communally – to turn the violence in on themselves. This process has been described with the metaphor of the destruction of the social fabric (e.g. Burnet 2012), and it was evoked also in northern Uganda. One of the young active Protestant women with whom I discussed the issue elaborated this point when, months after my initial interviews with her, I asked her about the silence I had experienced:

And now you see that there’s a lot of trauma. You see that? That is it. They don’t want to talk about it, but it is affecting them. They know it; others were raped, they did not talk about it. Nobody knew about it. Okay! And those other stories of relations, at least everyone in this ... part of the district, have been, in a way, affected ... Like there’s an askari [guard] here, the daughter remained there [with the rebels] until today; they don’t know whether she’s alive or she’s dead. But they will not talk about it. Unless they hear someone talking like war, then they become, and maybe they’ll even keep quiet. Now, that gives it. People become angry so fast. Their emotions is disturbed. You, you just trigger it. That is why there’s a lot of violence. There’s too much violence here. Wives killing the husbands, husbands killing wives, children. So, that is the result of it. Eh! Because talking, choosing not to talk about it, does not mean that you don’t know and it’s not affecting you. But and because you even don’t talk about it, you want to put yours in action. Anyone who triggers it, it comes all and [snaps her fingers]. Lot of trauma. (Interview, 2013).

My friend’s description evokes this sense of a trauma that permeates the weave of the ordinary, and of memories that may be triggered and spill out uncontrollably; as ‘contamination that seeps into [the affected person’s] immediate environment – his family and home’ (Meinert and Whyte 2017, 284). This is one side of a descent into the ordinary. But the other face of what Das describes suggests inhabiting the life that was shattered by violence as a precarious movement towards healing: an acknowledgement of what has happened, coupled with the acknowledgement that life can and must go on despite it. I believe it is here in particular that over-reliance on the trauma paradigm can lead to misconceptions about the meanings of silence in post-conflict societies. Not all memories of the past are traumatic; rather, for many, memories and experiences have been integrated into the person’s existing inner world (Maček 2014b, 4), in which case not talking about the past does not necessarily imply negative avoidance but, rather, a precarious movement towards healing.

This weave of life, wherein the past is present, albeit not necessarily or often spoken of, can be conceptualised as a culture of silence (Eastmond and Selimovic 2012) wherein ‘silence may hold important meanings and carry agency in making and upholding vital relationships’ (2012, 505). As sociologist Elina Oinas (2001) has shown in a different context, for girls to avoid talking about things they experience as
uncomfortable does not necessarily imply repression or avoidance, but can rather indicate an attitude of pragmatic coming to terms or of ‘constructive normality’ (ibid., 84), whereby a set of ‘embodied and often unconscious social skills [allow for] surviving day-to-day life as a social being’ (ibid., 87). As Burnet (2012) has argued for Rwanda, however, silence can simultaneously be a culturally appropriate, voluntarily adopted coping mechanism, and hegemonically enforced. In the same vein, I argue that silence in northern Uganda can indeed be understood and should be respected as a coping mechanism. But coping mechanisms have repercussions; as I show in Chapter Seven, the careful monitoring of what can and cannot be spoken of stunts much-needed societal and political critique in contemporary Kitgum.

For now, however, the question I wish to address is: what are the methodological implications of these alternative readings of silence? If memories and knowledge of the past may be effectively related without words – that is, embodied in practices, in deliberate silences, in gestures, and inscribed in bodies (Burnet 2012; Kidron 2009) – it becomes necessary to focus one’s attention on something far beyond words. As Kidron, Das, and Burnet have all argued, sensitivity to non-verbal cues tends to increase with the time one spends in the field. What also tends to increase with time is trust; in Burnet’s (2012) case, it took years of building rapport and proficiency in the language for people to trust her with their most intimate and painful memories of the Rwandan genocide. My own experience during fieldwork was that both sensitivity to reading non-verbal cues and progress in trust and friendship changed what people kept silent and what they would share.

One day towards the very end of my fieldwork, as I was cooking with a neighbour with whom I had spent a lot of time over the previous months, she suddenly, for no apparent reason, pointed to the scar on her arm. I had often seen it but only barely registered it (see Jauhola 2018 for an account of a similar experience). She told me it was from a bullet, and then went on to list a number of people related to her who were killed during the war. We continued with our tasks in silence for some time after that, until I ventured to say that when I was there in 2006 and the war was still going on and people were at the camps, everybody was talking about the war, but that now, few do.

Grace: Because now the rebels are away, they’re in Congo.

Henni: Yeah. But still, people don’t talk about that time, it’s like they don’t want to remember.

Grace: They don’t. Even I, I don’t like to talk about it. I don’t.

Although she said she does not like talking about it, I did not feel she was telling me to pull back, particularly as the initiative to mention the bullet wound had been hers. I thus said that I had been wondering whether it was just that people did not want to talk to me about it, or whether they did not talk with friends or family either. ‘They do not,’ she responded. Pausing in what she was doing, Grace then started talking.
Throughout her narrative, I was stirring a pot of rice to keep it from burning, and as she continued, merely shook my head from time to time in empathy and disbelief, but she did not need prompting. It seemed that once the floodgates opened, there was no stopping the memories: A cousin brother from a neighbouring house had been killed. Her friend had been abducted along with a group of other girls, and of the entire group, this friend was the only one who came back. The friend had been impregnated by the rebels, the child had died, and now the woman had HIV. One time they had seen the rebels just outside the house, and a hundred of them had run to the church for shelter. They had had nothing with them, but by nine the next morning they had been so desperate that someone had dared to go out to fetch them water. Grace told of a Christmas they had spent hiding in their huts, listening to the rebels moving around outside. There had been shooting everywhere, and the blasts of bombs. Her father's compound had been bombed. During the war, there had been public showings of videos with images of breasts and penises cut off, of chopped limbs boiling in pots, but nobody wanted to go to see them.

I continued stirring the rice, concentrating on the task so as to counter the surreal sensation of being witness to the heart-wrenching memories of someone I had always thought of as so happy and ‘free’ - as the Acholi often describe those with an open and friendly demeanour towards others. At the end of the list of memories, Grace returned to the incident that had scarred her arm.

I was carrying the baby with my other hand. If it had been a stronger gun that they fired, we would all have been dead. The rebel was carrying two guns. I went in, my hand, it was broken, I didn't feel a thing, there was just blood flowing. I went to another room, they tied it from here. We really suffered. We really suffered. It was just too much.

Memories of the war in northern Uganda are everywhere; they trickle into the everyday, and to such an extent that there is nothing spectacular about them, they are simply part of the weave of life. As many of my friends explained to me, there was no need to talk about the war, ‘Because you know you’ve experienced the same thing. So it’s useless to talk about it. After all, the other person has experienced it. It was our normal way of living’ (Interview, 2013). Breaking into laughter, my friend continued, ‘So talking about it is even monotonous.’ This sense of the war being nothing particular to talk about, because the war had been so entirely ordinary for those who lived through it, was repeated in many of my later interviews, and it seemed particularly prevalent among those who had no memories of life before the war. One boy told me that he grew up thinking houses are for living in during the day, and that at night everyone everywhere slept in a church. When war becomes normalized, it is unnecessary to talk about it among those who share that sense of normalcy.
Yet, although this silence can at times be read as a sign of healing and overcoming, there are also times when the absence of words is a signal of something quite different. As Koselleck has written:

There will occur events, or chains of events, which are beyond the pale of language, and to which words, all sentences, all speech can only react. There are events for which words fail us, which leave us dumb, and to which, perhaps, we can only react with silence. (Koselleck 1989, 652)

Jenny Edkins (2003) has argued that scholarly reference to unspeakability may be the chosen escape for the academic who cannot deal with the gravity of the events for which she seeks words. In Edkins’ view, it is almost too easy to say that some things are simply too terrible for words. How then should one, as a researcher, and as a human being, deal with genuine failure of words, when one is left numb, when one would rather turn away from something than engage with it, or write about it?

**Ethics in encounters with silence**

In a book dedicated to contemplating the ethical and emotional challenges of fieldwork in contexts affected by war (Thomson, Ansons, and Murison 2013), transitional justice expert Lino Ogola (2013) provides an arresting account of his encounter with an elderly Acholi man. The man was a survivor of one the worst massacres experienced during the northern Ugandan war, someone whom Ogola approached in the course of research he was conducting for a research and advocacy NGO. The man refused to answer Ogola’s questions. Researcher after researcher had come to interview him, and time and time again he had recounted his story, yet he had never benefited in any way whatsoever from sharing it. Ogola suspects that the absence of a language barrier and, probably, also of the historically constructed racialized power structure that inevitably posits a white researcher as a potential patron in Acholiland (Whitmore 2011), allowed the elderly man to express his true feelings about how scholars had treated him. It empowered him to refuse to allow Ogola to extract his story from him once more; it enabled him to choose silence.

It is an ethical imperative that research should not cause harm to its participants (Meth and Malaza 2003). Yet the cumulative effect of numerous research projects had clearly caused the old man both hurt and annoyance. In ‘research hotspots’, places like northern Uganda, and particularly their fairly easily accessible and comfortable urban centres, this cumulative effect can be quite considerable. I am tempted to name this the ‘Café Sankofa effect’ after one of my family’s favourite places of respite in Gulu town, where we went for a few days’ break about once a month throughout the time we lived in Kitgum. Similar places exist elsewhere: places with cool beers, brownies, and espresso; places that pull in a crowd of MA and PhD students and research consultants from the Global North, often in the company of their local friends and colleagues, jointly searching for a break from the emotional toll of
studying the aftermath of war. In 2013, over coffee in one such place, Lino Ogora estimated that ever since the final years of the war, five new researchers had come to visit him every month. It seems clear that these flocks of researchers leave a print on the society they study. It was clear to Ogora, and had become even clearer to him after his encounter with the elderly man. Even among those of my Acholi friends who had not themselves been interviewed by countless researchers, there was an awareness that people were growing tired of researchers, particularly researchers who wanted to hear about the war: a kind of collective research fatigue. But what should those of us who belong to this flock of researchers – who have been to such ‘research hot-spots’, made friends in them, and invested years of our lives in understanding them – think of this? Should we return for more but make sure we do not overburden those individuals who have already been burdened by previous researchers? Or should we stay away, and allow the Acholi to save their stories for their children? 44

I don’t think there are easy responses to such questions, but despite my inability to answer them, I feel they need to be posed. The question I wish to address here concerns the ethical way to go about silence when we encounter it in the course of our research in the aftermath of war: when should we break it, when protect it? Arguing against the kind of objectification of ethics that we increasingly see around us in academia – the kind of ‘ethics’ that can be assessed by way of the mechanized checkboxes of many ethical assessment committees – I wish to draw on the experiences I have outlined in the reflections above to speak of fieldwork ethics as a form of everyday ethics, as implied by Lambek (2010). In his work on ‘ordinary ethics’, Lambek argues that the human condition renders it impossible for us to escape the fact that our acts, down to our most simple gestures and words, are subject to being judged against criteria defining what is good. This condition is universal although the criteria are not – as shown, for instance, by my discussion about different approaches to understanding silence.

Action research scholars Lundy and McGovern (2006) have argued that ‘in situations where political violence has occurred and marginalized groups have experienced social injustice, it is ethically impossible and morally reprehensible for social researchers to remain detached and silent’ (ibid., 49). Yet, on a totally different note, Kidron (2009) claims that studies of silenced memories risk becoming the political or moral missions of scholars seeking to liberate the perceived victims of silence. Referring to Hayden’s (2007) analysis of how the moral visions of ethnographers may impair their analytical insight, Kidron discusses those underpinning the engagement ‘of the healthy, vocal, and politically liberated

44 Something of this order is suggested by Marsha Henry in a blog that lists reasons ‘not to write your master’s thesis on sexual violence in situations of war’ (Henry 2013). While intended as a thought-provoker for those who do write such theses, that they might then do so in a more ethical way, I think the question of whether we actually should refrain from selecting certain research topics in some locations is one which should be taken seriously in its own right.
individual’ with societies recovering from war, noting that they ‘may wreak havoc with our observations and findings, reflecting our own worldviews rather than the lived experience of our subjects’ (Kidron 2009, 18).

In contrast to Lundy and McGovern, for whom the option lies between action research and remaining ‘detached and silent’, I argue that the two – silence and action – are not each other’s opposites. To refrain from immediate action does not imply the scholar’s detachment, nor does it need to mean silence. The choice between ‘breaking the silence’ and ‘protecting it’ is a thoroughly ethical one, but it can only be resolved situationally. This situational ethical analysis, which is not a one-off exercise, but should rather be cultivated as an in-built and on-going process of ethical reflexivity throughout the research process, requires acknowledgement of temporality, and of the relational character of the research process and of silence itself. Situations change over the course of a research project, and even over the course of a single day of fieldwork. What one informant may be unwilling to discuss may be precisely the subject on which another wishes to spend hours sharing her experiences. What might be acceptable for someone to say about the northern Ugandan war in middle-class Kampala, might be very different to what is possible and acceptable for someone to say in a village context where perpetrators of war-time violence live as each other’s neighbours. And what a research participant might be willing to divulge to one scholar might be something she would never discuss with another, whether because of age, gender, a language barrier, or affection or dislike.

This aspect of relationality is crucial, for silence takes two: it is never born solely of the researcher or those she researchers, but in the relationship between them (Alava 2016b). The researcher’s positionality and the constantly evolving webs of relationships she has with her informants influence the shape, extent, and tone of silence – and of its absence. What is particularly at stake is the transformation and unfolding of these relationships over time. As Finnström’s (2015) analysis of secrets kept and later broken during more than ten years of research in northern Uganda shows, issues that have been veiled in silence may be unveiled much later. Changes in the external political context, in the participants’ desire to speak out, in the researcher’s orientation and wish for impact, all have bearing on the relationship between the researcher and her informants, and on what this relationship carries. Each of these issues influences the others in countless ways, and as the variables change, so do the ethical questions that silence and its breaking posit to the researcher. No institutionalised and bureaucratised ‘ethical clearance’ procedure can cater for questions of this order. To use Lambek’s (2010) term, the ordinary ethics that cut through the everyday of fieldwork as a matter of living (Malkki 2007), escape control and order.
Empathetic listening – and acquiescence at the limits of an ethics of encounter

Sarah, a young woman with whom I spent a lot of time in Kitgum once said something that has stayed with me to this day. She was one of the liveliest and most active people I knew, often joking, laughing, and smiling, and it took me months to realise that she had had an extremely hard life. Her perseverance through it all to find herself standing on her feet, with a respectable job, and a respected position in her church, was remarkable. Yet she had suffered immense loss, and eventually shared with me memories of things she had seen during the war that shook me to the core. One day, sometime after these memories had been shared, Sarah told me that a member of her family had lost a baby. I offered my condolences and sighed that she had had a tough life. She answered, with a small firm smile on her face: ‘I’m strong. On the outside. But if you looked in, you wouldn’t survive.’ I believe she was in some very real sense right. There was such pain, not only within her, but within northern Uganda as a whole, that it is difficult for the ethnographer to survive the encounter emotionally.45

Arguing for ethnography as the practice of cultivated empathy, Burnet (2012) suggests that the ethical alternative for researchers encountering people who have witnessed violence, may in fact be to hold back, noting that respecting people’s choices not to talk is a way of giving them back the agency taken from them during the violence they have endured or witnessed. Burnet’s view resonates strongly with my own sense that to impose the topic of war on people whose everyday lives I was researching would have been inappropriate and unethical of me. But I must also acknowledge that by protecting the silence of my collocutors, I was also protecting myself. It was easier for me to stay silent, to avoid head-on engagement with the war; to pick a topic of research that did not have the war at its apex. In notes from the final weeks of my 2013 fieldwork, I reflected that while I was to an extent drawn by harrowing stories of war, I had also been very drawn to protecting the silence; as I noted, ‘the apparent peace (=silence) actually suits me very well. It’s less emotionally draining. And this is exactly the same reason that the people here are silent.’ (Fieldwork notes, February 2013, emphasis in original).

Dealing with the kinds of atrocities and violence that the northern Ugandan war has involved rightly forces researchers to reflect on the complex motives that drive our research. To what extent is research in former warzones driven by a voyeuristic impulse? It is a painful question to ask, but one that cannot be lightly bypassed. We know that violence sells headlines, and there is no reason to assume that a similar

45 See Maček (2014a) and Thomson et al. (2013) for researchers’ personal reflections on research in such contexts.
fascination with the unspeakable does not also promote academic publications. Yet the kind of research that dwells on the horrors of mass perpetrated violence without giving readers any tools with which to contextualise or come to grips with it, has rightly been criticised for being ‘pornographic’ (Maček 2014b, 20). Fieldwork in contexts shattered by decades of war and violence is thus mired in multiple ethical and emotional pressures and dilemmas, making what Hoel (2013) writes about it particularly pertinent. Hoel argues that while we as researchers

\textit{partake} in power and in the construction of relationships of power ... we also engage in research that requires a high level of personal commitment, giving of yourself in particular research encounters - not because of what you might gain in return, but because this is also an ethical and human interaction that is taking place, the building of trust, and embodying unfamiliar and at times challenging local environments. Through these imbricated nodes, the notion of being vulnerable emerges as a delicate embodied response to research relationships that generates emotional and affective sentiments. (Hoel 2013, 42, emphasis in original)

This passage, framed with accounts of encounters from Hoel’s own fieldwork, provides a touching image of a profoundly ethical, embodied fieldwork encounter – one between a vulnerable researcher and a vulnerable interlocutor – which may even have a healing effect for the interlocutor (ibid.). But does the sharing of pain in fieldwork encounters always have a healing effect? Recall the encounter I had with Grace where, as we cooked, she suddenly began sharing with me her memories of the war. As I recall the moment in hindsight, I can see that it was in many ways painful, for both of us. It was clearly painful for my friend and I felt like a witness to something I had no way of really understanding: a witness to pain that I could not console. All I could do was be there and listen, and show by my gestures and small intonations that I was listening. But I had no way of knowing whether re-telling her story eased my friend’s pain.

The life story interview I conducted with Daniel, someone whose family had shared two separate incidents with my own, which connected us in a special way, tells a somewhat different story. Daniel, whom I had already known for a few months when I interviewed him, began his story by mentioning a rebel attack he had witnessed as a child. Soon the tone of the interview changed, however, and for almost three hours we spoke in a very relaxed way about all sorts of things: children, friendships, and dreams for the future. At one point, far into the interview, I asked him about his first

\begin{footnote}{Maček reflects, on the other hand, on how research on such heavy topics often exhausts and even traumatises scholars themselves, which does not bear favourably on career development. As she notes, scholars of violence know full well that researching violence is not ‘cool’, but rather emotionally and ethically exhausting. Yet the respectful awe I have sometimes encountered when telling colleagues about my research in a post-conflict community, does speak of a particular and disturbing appeal of research into ‘murky’ topics such as war, trauma and violence (see also Häkkinen and Salasuo 2015).}

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memories as a child. When he did not quite understand what I meant by my question, I gave an example of some of my own memories from early childhood, of being stung by a bee, and of walking under falling leaves with my father. Daniel responded by telling me the first two things he remembered. The first was when, as a three-year-old, he had succeeded in sowing, caring for, and eventually harvesting his own small plot of groundnuts. The second was when, at the age of four, he had to watch at short range the rebels beating someone he knew almost to death. Without my asking, he told me a detailed account of the event and its aftermath: how he had felt, and how he still carried the memory with him.

I told Daniel he was a rare case, since many of the people I interviewed said nothing about the war, and asked whether he was surprised to hear that. He said absolutely not, since people generally did not talk about the war. Other than his wife I had been the first, and would be the last, to hear his story. I asked Daniel why he had told me. He answered, 'Because I love you,' and laughed. This was not a romantic moment in the slightest; rather, the feeling was an evocation of the particular relationship enabled by the out-of-the-ordinary situation. The interview encounter, and the telling of his life story, drew us to discuss things which, as my friend explained to me, would usually not be considered appropriate to share in a friendship. As he said, the young urban Acholi man and woman learn to shield what is on the inside: 'God for us all, man for himself. So, we can share other things, eh? We can share God, but now, when it comes to the inner part of me, I will not say it out, so that you should not know.' The interview, which was embedded in a family friendship that had developed over shared experiences of sickness, fear, and happiness, allowed a break in the norm of keeping things in and produced a particular kind of trustful fieldwork encounter, which Daniel characterised with the surprising but perhaps apt concept of love. Similarly, Meinert (2015, 124–28) describes how it was only years after beginning her research in northern Uganda that some informants told her about what they had experienced during the war: the required trust was built slowly, but even once silence was broken, there was no way of knowing whether the stories that emerged could be trusted as ‘true’.

But such a relationship does not – far from it – develop with every interlocutor; countless relationships in the field never include trust, sharing, or friendship, let alone love. While Hoel evokes the notion of embodiment to call for ethical and human interaction in research encounters, I feel a focus on embodiment also helps in coming to terms with situations wherein stories of exemplary ethics cannot be told, and where the researcher’s limitations affect the spaces between self and other where silences are formed, kept, or broken. These embodied limitations may relate to situations in which research participants expect the researcher to feel comfortable with something when she is not; those created by embodied roles, such as motherhood; and by the researcher’s traits – quick-temperedness, stubbornness, irritability, or as Maček (2014a)
has noted, an inability to deal with the emotional strain of encountering the pain and trauma of people one encounters.

Many roles, characteristics, and abilities enable certain kinds of understanding, but as I learned in relation to silence, they may also disenable. They may be the cause for silence. When my friend said to me, ‘If you looked in, you would not survive,’ I thought she was referring to the harshness of what she held within her. In hindsight, I realise her statement was also an assessment of me, and of what I, as a person and as a researcher, was in her eyes capable of bearing.

**Unshackling the preconceptions: re-reading silence**

Coming to re-read silence as I have in the course of this study was not at all self-evident or easy. I found it extremely difficult to understand the insistence of so many of my friends in Kitgum that talking about the past even with close friends or family was completely unnecessary, when for myself, the sharing of painful experiences signals intimacy and closeness. As a Finn, I should, stereotypically, value silence as a subtle form of communication (Carbaugh, Berry, and Nurmi-Kari-Berry 2006). Yet I am, perhaps, not a very stereotypical Finn but, rather, emotionally outspoken, very talkative, and tending to prefer ceaseless banter to silence. For me, intuitively, the ‘natural’ and ‘good’ response to painful memories would seem to be to express distress and sorrow – to talk until the pain lessens. Learning to identify and verbalise emotions is a prime concern for young adults in my social settings, and a skill in which parents like myself also train our children. The public psychotherapeutic culture of the postmodern West also spurs on this kind of emotional confessionality. In Kitgum the same did not hold, and the expression of excess emotion was not considered appropriate in many such situations where an emotional outburst in my own cultural setting would have been considered fair enough.

Speaking out about everyday emotions, and speaking about traumatic memories, are of course two different things. But the cultural frames and narratives surrounding silence in general influence the ways in which an ethnographer comes to interpret the silence encountered in fieldwork. In my case, the cultural frames I carried with me from Finland intermingled with the ways in which the Catholic priests made sense of the silence they witnessed among their parishioners. Partly, the shift in my view of silence came about through a fusion of horizons with people I encountered in Acholi, particularly through learning about their horizons in an unverbalised way: in situations where people reacted to my or my children’s expressions of emotion by signalling that they were considered strange, for example. I will dwell in some detail on two encounters in which this type of emotional learning took place, and which have profoundly influenced my reading of silence in Kitgum.

One afternoon, a visitor appeared on our porch just a few minutes after the death of my son’s puppy. I was exhausted after many long days of fieldwork and long nights of writing fieldwork notes, so when my homesick four-year-old son cried
uncontrollably about the loss of a puppy I had forgotten to get injected for rabies, I was quite the emotional wreck. In my fieldwork diary, I wrote:

Once I get the boys to sleep, Hassu has died. Just as I am washing the dead puppy so that the boys can say farewell and bury him after their nap, [a visitor] arrives. He can probably not quite understand what he sees: me crying over a dead puppy, washing away its bloody vomit. I go to wash my hands and gather myself a little, cover the puppy with an old newspaper, and sit down by the visitor on the terrace. He has come to agree on a time for an interview ... I try to keep myself together, struggling between not crying and finding words in which I might explain myself. I try to say that my son has been missing home so much, the dog meant a lot to him. But it doesn’t seem to really make much sense, and I can’t do it without my voice breaking. So I suggest we meet for an interview in the afternoon, and try to explain myself by saying “sorry, I’m an emotional woman.” [The visitor] leaves, and I go in and burst into bitter tears, angry at myself for not arranging for the vet on time, sorry for my son who has to deal with his friend dying, and at a loss for words for explaining the disparities in the worth of human or canine life in different corners of the world. I wonder what [the visitor] must think of me, and what everyone else thinks of me. (Fieldwork notes January 2013)

While the encounter says much about the different cultural expectations concerning human-canine relationships – puppies in Kitgum are taught to be tough guard dogs, not cuddled – it (and similar incidents) also taught me, more importantly, that my preconceptions about appropriate reasons for expressing emotion had to be recalibrated in Acholiland. Similarly to what Burnet (2012, 116) mentions of Rwanda, silence in Acholiland is a culturally appropriate coping mechanism for dealing with painful memories and, as I realised when observing my children playing with our Acholi neighbours’ children, also for dealing with physical pain. Even very small boys were taught not to cry and boys the same age or a bit older than my four-year-old would bite back tears and concentrate on breathing deeply rather than expressing their pain, even when seriously injured. Burnet (ibid.) notes that in Rwanda, recalling memories that might make a person cry, particularly before a relative newcomer like an ethnographer, was not considered appropriate. A similar cultural norm likely also influenced my encounters with people in Kitgum, and explains in part the increase in people’s reference to war as I came to know them more closely.

But more than this, the incident with the puppy seemed to prove the assessment my friend had made a few weeks earlier. If I had a hard time dealing with exhaustion, my child’s homesickness and a dead dog, how could I survive looking into the horrors of war that people around me carried in their memories? The encounter with the man and the puppy shares a cranny in the halls of my memory with an encounter I had seven years earlier, on my first visit to Kitgum, which began with a trip to one of the most congested displacement camps in the district. That first visit plunged me into
shock. The day was scorching hot, the camp was crowded and noisy, children were dirty and many looked gravely ill, and my overall impression was of beyond inhuman living conditions and utter despair. After a half-day visit to the camp, I returned utterly shaken to the comfort of my hotel. In my thesis, I describe what happened next in the following way:

Despite the comfort of a hot shower and the imported chocolate I had waiting for me at the hotel, the only thing I could think of at the time was that I needed to get out. Luckily there was no flight out of Kitgum for two days, for I am sure I would have run away had it been an option. Shock with the circumstances at the camp, anger with humankind for allowing such suffering, profound doubt in my own capacity to do any meaningful research in such overwhelming surroundings - the feelings came in torrents, as did the corresponding tears. Having heard me crying in my room, Evelyn, the young receptionist at the hotel [who had been among the survivors in a group of schoolgirls abducted by the LRM/A], came knocking at the door to ask me what was wrong. At the time, her words gave me little comfort, but during the following days the words spurred in me a shame-filled resilience that pulled me through the rest of my fieldwork: ‘But think about us, we have lived in these camps all our lives’. (Alava 2008, 18-19)

I felt a similar kind of shame after the encounter with the man over the dead puppy, particularly as I learned in the interview I had with him later in the day that he had been the only survivor of a rebel ambush in which he had seen many of his friends killed. Crying over a puppy seemed more than a little out of proportion. Yet the feeling of shame was much less intense than after the encounter with Evelyn, partly because the man made no similar heart-wrenching statement, but also because I was so engrossed in trying to cope with the stress of combining fieldwork and family, and simply too sad for my son, sad about the puppy, and guilt-ridden for having forgotten to order a rabies shot. While in 2006 it was a ‘shame-filled resilience’ that pulled me through my fieldwork, what upheld me during the longer period of of living with my family in Kitgum was the exponentially more complex web of my and my family’s relationships with informants, acquaintances, and friends, and the myriad emotions attached to them – all of which shaped the way I listened to the silence that had largely fallen on the town since 2006.

Acknowledgement of how circumstances and personal characteristics delimit the possibility of ethical, embodied fieldwork encounters, leads me to some disconcerting reflections. What can and should one do if, as a researcher, one wishes to show commitment to a different kind of ethics of research than seemingly allowed by the context and the scholar’s own embodied limitations? What if the scholar’s inability to hear stops her informants from speaking out as they would wish?

I feel there are no easy answers to such complex questions. What seems clear, however, is that while informants may rightly refuse to answer questions, and communities may rightly wrap past violence in a shroud of silence, we as researchers
cannot similarly silence question about the ethics of engaging with such communities and individuals. Openness to the challenge these questions pose has led me to attempt to adopt throughout this study what Page (2017) has recently describes as a form of vulnerable writing:

[What is at the heart of vulnerable methods and vulnerable writing are ongoing questions about what unsettles, about relations to the unfamiliar and strange, and about the erasure of the complexities of subjectivity... This unsettled uncertainty of the research process, rather than foreclosing on further understandings, provides space for new forms of unknowing and continued attempts at understanding the stories of others. (ibid., 28).

As Page notes, and as I reflected when choosing to mute my own explanatory narrative of the northern Ugandan war (Chapter Four), adopting such an approach goes against the grain of the desire to know, expose and explain. It also draws attention to questions of writing as representation.

Ethics in writing and representation

So far I have argued that the ethics of researching silence must always be pondered on the relational level, that is, in encounters we have in the field with our informants. In the final part of this chapter, I turn to weighing in the ethics of research on a representational level. The two levels are not entirely separate, since the ethics of representation relates both to how we plan, conduct, and write about our research, and also to how the language we use in doing so structures our thoughts and acts, and hence positions us in relation to those we study. Here, I follow the view of the existential anthropologist Michael Jackson, who claims:

Whether we admit it or not, every cool act of analysis is also a creative act initiated within our particular personality and explicable in terms of our biography. In my view, true objectivity in interpretation does not consist in repressing, masking, or setting aside this biographical field of choice and intention but in revealing it clearly as it interacts with history, producing new syntheses in the shape of a poem, an essay, or even a revolutionary act. (Jackson 2013, 88)

Such a view of ethnography, which founds itself on moral, aesthetic, and political commitments rather than epistemological certainties (ibid.), also foregrounds the question of how pre-theoretical commitments (Moore 2004) guide our interpretations of silence. As Fassin and Rechtman (2009) have argued, the language of trauma, healing, and speaking out is entangled within a politics of representation and morality – something which also has profound, ethically questionable implications for research. Kidron writes:

as Euro-Western discourses of hegemony and subjugation, human rights, victimhood, and trauma take on a moral register of universal truth,
enlightenment, and progress, our personal and professional vision of what should be remembered and articulated, as well as how, where, and by whom, is in my view at odds with the ethnographic imperative of ‘sustained engagement’ with our subjects ‘on their terms’ (Kidron 2009 in author’s responses to comments to article).

The overwhelming moral weight of the ‘trauma paradigm’ leads to places like northern Uganda being ascribed the labels of post-conflict, traumatised, or war-affected, when may they not also be described by words such as recovering, elastic, dynamic, or even just relieved? These words matter, for many reasons, one of which is that they position the researcher relationally. What, for instance, might be implied by saying northern Uganda is ‘aggrieved’, rather than ‘traumatised’? Would it not call the scholar away from the role of the liberator, into that of the mourner? To mourn does not require speech. To mourn can mean to stay silent together.

The question of why labels like ‘traumatised’, ‘post-conflict’ and ‘war-affected’ are so common in our research proposals and publications is a complex one which I cannot here address at more length than to suggest one explanation. I suspect that the practice follows in part from how so much of the research on ‘post-war societies’ takes war as its starting point and then often focuses on the very worst aspects of it: child soldiers, former abductees, or the victims and perpetrators of atrocities. There are many good reasons for this and I am not suggesting it should cease. But I think there is serious reason to consider whether the version of the world thus constructed does justice to the societies described. Holly Porter, whose research has explored communal and individual responses to rape in Acholiland, writes of this beautifully:

Rape is an aberration – the uglier side of the elephant, as an Acholi illustration goes, but not the whole animal. If you make up your mind about the nature of elephants based only on this vision you would decide that they are a rough, wrinkly and gray animal with no mouths or eyes – but you would only have looked at an inch on the left buttocks. Then again, if you really want to understand the great beast, you will need to look at it in its entirety, hairy bottom included. (Porter 2013, 48)

Any study in a post-war context will have to take account of the war itself and, regardless of her chosen angle of analysis, each scholar will have to find words with which to describe the traces of the violent past in the present. Yet my research experience shows that it is possible to research a war-affected community in a meaningful way while refraining from taking the war as the primary point of reference, and while problematising the assumption that silence after war signals ‘trauma’. Choosing not to break the silence after war but, rather, to focus on what people themselves find meaningful and wish to discuss, can facilitate description of how people come to terms with the past, how they make meaning in the present, and how they seek to materialise their dreams for the future. As Blaufuss has argued, our final
authority as authors ‘narrows the ability to present multiple truths and narratives, various narratives that had been part of what felt like an extensive conversation, as told and lived in the field’ (2007, 14). The ethical challenges of researching silence thus follow us through from the moment of selecting topics, through each and every fieldwork encounter, to the final challenge that lies at our fingertips as we choose the words with which to describe the atmosphere and feeling of the ‘field’ where our ethnographies are set.

Closing and moving ahead

This chapter had two aims. First, it sought to describe Kitgum as a town emerging from war, one characterized by silences and their occasional breakings, and by an oscillation between fear and hope. I argued that it is essential to differentiate between multiple reasons for silences, and advocated analyses’ looking beyond the category of ‘trauma’ as an explanation for societal dynamics in the aftermath of war. And, as future chapters will further elaborate, it is not only the past that leaves Kitgum heavy with silence at times, for silence also arises from uncertainty about the political present, and from ambiguity concerning the future. Furthermore, silence is not always destructive; it may be precisely what enables life to continue and people to move on.

Second, through reflection on my own fieldwork encounters and my evolving interpretations of them in Kitgum, I considered the ethical implications of researching societies in which violent pasts are veiled in silence. Ethics as institutionalised in the bureaucratised processes of academic ethical clearance committees has little to offer for navigating everyday fieldwork encounters in such contexts; instead, I highlighted the need to commit to sustained engagement with the ‘ordinariness’ and situationality of ethics. Furthermore, I argued that there is a need to pose difficult questions about the cumulative effect of research in ‘hot-spots’ like northern Uganda, even while I myself acknowledged a failure to provide answers to many of the questions I raised.

In the following chapters, the notions of silence, trauma, and memory will return, and I will suggest other, parallel readings of them. In Chapter Six I begin an analysis of the public performance of politics in churches in Kitgum, and argue that their efficacy rests on that which is neither seen nor heard. As I argue in Chapter Seven, the politics of fear and uncertainty links with silence in essential ways, for fear makes people silent, and silence makes people uncertain. In Chapter Eight, I turn another leaf, and suggest an alternative, partially contradictory reading, of silence, showing instead how silence about the past relates to moving forward.
Chapter 6

To stand atop an anthill
Performing the state in Kitgum

People say cung i wibye [to stand atop an anthill] because they feel politicians stand above them to talk to them, rather than standing at the same level. That is what politics is all about: about wanting power. When the British came, that is how they ruled, and that is how ‘politics’ came to be translated in this way. When we realised that it was possible for us to get rid of the British and for us to be free; for Únum to come; ‘politics’ became associated with freedom. But now, people have realised that it has gone back to being all about getting power; that these ones who want to climb up to the anthill, they will do anything to get power. The politicians are just lying. They are all full of lies.
(Elderly man in Kitgum, November 2012)

This chapter shows how public church events provide arenas for negotiation and contestation over the political narratives that shape societal co-existence in post-war northern Uganda. While these events at times offer spaces for imagining difference, and for pushing the boundaries of the status quo, they ultimately reproduce a particular kind of Ugandan state. Although this highly gendered, neopatrimonial, and violently ethnicised state is not omnipotent, it establishes powerful boundaries within which politics can be narrated and community imagined.

To make these claims, I focus on a particular kind of politics, namely, what in Acholi is referred to as cung i wibye, which means literally to ‘stand on an anthill’. While numerous elderly informants explained the concept to me in ways similar to the man quoted above, younger people I spoke with never mentioned the term’s colonial connotations. Political leaders I interviewed were quick to note that cung i wibye is a slang notion, used by people in connection with elections, and that it is the wrong translation for ‘politics’, which should rather be translated as something like lok kom loc lobo, that is, ‘the way the world is ruled’. While most people acknowledge, when asked, that cung i wibye properly relates to the politics of rallying, particularly in the run-up to elections, the word is, alongside the acholianised politik, the most common translation for ‘politics’ in Kitgum.

Contrary to the common claim in Kitgum that cung i wibye cannot and should not happen in church, I show in this chapter that public church gatherings routinely function as arenas for party politics and the politics of the state. In these situations, the churches are the anthills upon which politicians stand to present their agendas, confront their opponents, and woo their supporters. For people in Kitgum, church parties, which are held in fields near church buildings so as to accommodate large crowds, provide a chance to pray, sing, worship, and hear the word of God. They also
provide entertainment in the form of food, musical performances, and at the after-parties of Catholic events, traditional Acholi dances. For those involved in organising the events, church celebrations provide opportunities to ‘rub shoulders with the big shots’, as one of my Catholic informants once phrased it. Big shots – that is, notable politicians – are routinely present, and public functions allow clergy to consolidate their relationships with political leaders, to whom glossy invitation cards are routinely distributed well in advance. Politicians are also keen to join the organising committees of these events, where they at times wield considerable influence.

Some of these events, such as those I focus on in this chapter, offer a unique chance to witness national-level political drama. While the chapter is constructed around a detailed account of the 2012 state burial of a notable Acholi opposition politician, Tiberio Okeny Atwoma, it draws on insights I gained throughout my fieldwork, and in particular on the resonances between Atwoma’s burial and the handover of the Catholic Mission, and the commemoration of Saint Janani Luwum, in 2015. For residents of Kitgum, these three events, for which the president of Uganda travelled all the way to their town, were spectacular and highly out-of-the-ordinary occasions. In the midst of my own fieldwork as well, they appeared as episodes of particular importance, elaborate and rich in metaphoric content: what Hollander, borrowing from Hochschild (2003), refers to as magnified moments (Hollander 2004, 605).

These magnified moments lay bare some of the processes through which societal coexistence is negotiated in Uganda. I analyse this negotiation through the idea of narrative contestation, which I suggest takes place between various protagonists at public church events: first, between the ruling National Resistance Movement (NRM) government and the political opposition; second, between the politicians on the podium and those listening to them; and third, between the church and the state. In this chapter, my focus is on the first two of these, while in Chapter Eight I turn to analyse the ways in which particular church leaders have sought to challenge the violent underpinnings of contemporary Ugandan politics. Yet, just as spectacular cultural performances such as rituals and ceremonies take place against a backdrop of the everyday lifeworlds of their spectators, an analysis of these events also invites attention to be directed to their backdrop of the everyday and mundane. In Chapter Seven, therefore, I shift analysis to interstices between grand public events, and to the political narratives embedded in everyday lives in Kitgum.

The chapter begins with a detailed account of the most illuminating moments and speeches at the state burial of Tiberio Okeny Atwoma. I then introduce a set of theoretical concepts that I employ to describe key characteristics of the Ugandan state, and of Ugandan politics, as they unfold at public church events. These events are not only representative of political realities in Kitgum, but productive of them. While this state-making character was apparent at all mainline public church events in Kitgum, it was particularly accentuated when the events were attended by national-level
politicians, and most crucially so, by the president. Reading Atwoma’s burial as a magnified moment thus enables analysis of the character of the state and of politics, and hence of the boundaries of political imagination in contemporary Uganda and Acholiland.

Image 14. Priests prepare the altar, under Uganda’s national flag and the flag of the Catholic Church, at the Commemoration of the Acholi martyrs. (Paimol, October 2013)

The state burial of ‘a nationalist and a man of God’

These are the ceremonies that give life to the ruling party’s dream of perpetual rule, the pompous nothingness of the President’s birthday celebrations, the state-sanctioned beauty pageants from which they choose new mistresses, the football matches with predetermined outcomes. The unity galas and musical ‘bashes’, the days of national prayer, and above all these, the state funerals. (Gappah 2010, 19-20)

Presidential visits are a fairly uncommon occurrence in Ugandan districts as far away from the centres of state power as Kitgum, hence plenty of effort is put into smoothing the road for the president’s arrival. This was quite literally the case in October 2012, when the potholed murram (laterite) road between the presidential helicopter’s landing site and Atwoma’s family homestead was brought to a pristine condition just ahead of Atwoma’s state burial, which gathered thousands of people to the village of Oryang, outside Kitgum. An early member of the Democratic Party who
had left due to disagreements in the 1980s before rejoining it in 1996, Atwoma had represented the Acholi region at Uganda’s Constitutional Conference in London in 1961, and later was one of a number of Acholi representatives in the 1992 Constituent Assembly. In 1991 he was arrested together with a group of Acholi elders under suspicions of plotting a rebellion, and released months later once all accusations were found false (Amnesty International 1991). Although he was a known figure in Kitgum, Atwoma’s prominence had waned in recent years; an acquaintance who worked at the Catholic hospital told me that the elderly politician had received few visits while there, although, as she laughingly pointed out, this did not prevent local politicians going on the radio after his death to recount the many times they had been to see and assist him during his illness.

The granting of a state burial to Atwoma made it exceptional, as became apparent as Chiara and I neared the site. Soldiers and policemen had established a wide circumference around the homestead, and all who wished to enter were obliged to walk through a metal detector and undergo a body search. Unacceptable objects like my camera and the cracked mirror in the powder compact of the woman in front of me were removed. Once through the security check, people were advised to find their way to a tent. The ceremonial ground at large public events in Kitgum is always set up in the same way, and rather similarly to the description by Karlstrom in Buganda (2003): tents filled with rows of plastic chairs are placed to form three sides of a rectangle, with each tent reserved for a particular group: local participants; district, political, and religious leaders; the religious (priests, nuns, and lay brothers); and visitors from neighbouring districts. At the burial of Tiberio Atwoma women were also allowed to spread large raffia mats in front of the tents, and it was on one of these mats, in the shade of a spreading mango tree, that Chiara and I seated ourselves.

The long-drawn-out preparatory section of public church events, which is typically accompanied by either North American praise songs (such as Hillsong) or hymns played on a keyboard organ over the sound system, is crucial for the build-up of the ritual of state and church that is about to be performed. This time is used to signal the arrival of the many dignitaries, whose presence is commented on afterwards as a sign of the event’s success. The dignitaries typically make a point with their arrival, as for instance when politicians or religious leaders get up to greet each other in full view of the spectators. The handshake of the president with an opposition leader will be remarked upon by those participating in discussions afterwards, and is the image likely to be chosen for newspaper articles covering the event (see e.g. Oluka 2015).

The time before Mass officially begins is also used by the Master of Ceremonies (hereafter MC), who is usually a priest or former Catholic seminarian, to prepare the audience for what is ahead. For instance, at Atwoma’s burial the MC informed the crowd that the president would not be shaking hands with other speakers or with the family of the deceased because of the outbreak of Marburg disease in a distant part of Uganda, and that there would be a gun salute, during which he asked that those
present who, he acknowledged, were used to gunshots in this area, remain calm. The priest then explained the order of events and, in a manner that was typical of all these events, attempted to guide people’s disposition toward it:

After the blessing, police will carry out a solemn procession. Let us give attention to what is going on. Maintain silence, please, as the blessing of the body is going on. Maintain order. If you are not ready to stay here, then please get out. You must give Tiberio Atwoma the dignity that he deserves. And for us, we interpret this as the dignity that God has given him and we must be respectful of that.

Such disciplining by the priests and the MC was not always accepted – the solemn silence that the Catholic clergy in particular always requested, for example, was seldom present. With the exception of short moments when the crowd is absolutely silent and listening to the speaker, public masses and the political rallies that follow them are lively participatory events, where the crowd refuses to remain passive and silently appreciative spectators. This time was no exception; as the priest called on the mourners to rise, the women sitting around me on the ground started talking and broke out in a great deal of the local sound for disapproval: ‘Tst-tst-tst’. ‘Please, let us remain silent!’ the MC begged, as the crowd became louder and louder. Eventually the procession of priests entered, and the MC invited the local parish priest to welcome all the dignitaries, which he did with the following words:

Welcome, archbishop, priests, welcome to all those who have come to pay respect to Tiberio Okeny Atwoma. We know that Mzee [an honorary title for elderly men] was a believer, who was working for the government to help the Acholi people and Uganda at large... I extend a welcome to the vicar general, to all religious men and women, to government dignitaries, and all the dear mourners. Let us give a mighty clap for the gift of Atwoma. He was a nationalist, and he was a man of God.

And so the celebration of Mass was underway, and the event framed as a commemoration of a deceased nationalist and man of God – and concurrently, a celebration of a nation and a Church that outlived him. After the confession of sins, absolution, and an account of Tiberio Atwoma’s life by a prominent local member of the Democratic Party (DP), Archbishop John Baptist Odama gave the sermon. He narrated a vision of a united Uganda, and of a global community of responsible humans of different ethnicities, tribes, religions, and political parties, together seeking unity through forgiveness and love under the eyes of a loving, caring, and forgiving God. While these are typical themes in Odama’s theology (Whitmore 2010c), similar themes were oft-repeated at all Catholic events in Kitgum. The greater the political prestige of the event, the more both Catholic and Anglican sermons and prayers tended to emphasise the responsibility of political leaders to steer Uganda towards peace, unity, and God. So also at Atwoma’s burial:
We pray that you unite us to remember Tiberio Atwoma, who had respect for human rights, and who brought peace. Give these gifts to other leaders. Let them use politics to unite, and not to divide people. As a human being Tiberio Atwoma is now before you, forgive him... We pray for peace in our hearts, because we don’t have peace in our hearts or in our communities. Bless Uganda with good leaders. We thank you for the good leader Tiberio Atwoma. Give that same heart to other leaders, that they lead the people with your will and not with theirs.

As in every Catholic mass, the main celebrant then encouraged all those gathered to greet their neighbours with the words, ‘Peace be with you.’ The choir struck up a song, the chorus of which the audience also sang, requesting that the Lord bind us together with love and hope that cannot fail. All well-prepared Catholic Christians were then invited for communion. Just as communion was about to end, a helicopter flew low over the compound: the president was about to arrive. The arrival of Museveni, coinciding as it did with the moment when the chance to speak shifted from the priests to the many dignitaries, also signalled a shift in the tone of the public gathering: from the clerically-led emphasis on Christian reconciliation and unity, to one of open party political contest.

The president arrives – and the cung i wibye begins

As the line of the president’s vehicles approached the ceremonial ground, the police brass band struck up the national anthem. Only a handful of people joined in the singing, while others muttered and tried to peer over each other’s shoulders to see Museveni behind the big black cars and open-top army trucks loaded with soldiers in full combat gear that escorted him. The president and his company took their seats in the NRM-yellow tent emblazoned with the national emblem of Uganda which had been empty up until this point, and the line of bulky vehicles drove away. The mourners who had been selected to lay wreaths were now called up by the MC in an ascending order of hierarchy. A group of senior citizens, followed by local councillors, district council chairpersons (LC5s), Resident District Commissioners (RDCs), and representatives of the three major opposition parties each said a few routine words of farewell to the deceased.

The chairperson of Atwoma’s Democratic Party (DP), Norbert Mao, followed the farewells with an emphatic statement: ‘Democracy must be founded on justice. Uganda will never be peaceful if it is not led with justice and peace!’ To this, the crowd responded with enthusiastic applause and ululation, after which hundreds joined Mao as he sang the DP anthem into the microphone. Next in line to lay their wreaths were the ministers and the deputy speaker of parliament. He then requested the president, as principal mourner, to lay his wreath, which the president did, in silence. The archbishop laid the final wreath and called everyone to join him in a short moment of silence. The MC then announced that there would be a change in
program: because the principal mourner, for reasons which were not shared, could not speak once the casket had been lowered, speeches would be made before the final burial.

The first to speak was the chairperson of the organising committee, who, like practically all those following him, addressed his words primarily to the chief mourner:

Your Excellency, President Yoweri Kaguta Museveni, we extend our heart-felt appreciation for your joining together with the Acholi people and the Acholi sub-region in mourning. This is a simple act of love and care for humanity and for the Acholi people. As the saying goes, a leader in a moment of need and sorrow is a friend indeed. Our grateful thanks.

Very few people clapped in response. The MC then invited one of Atwoma’s sons to come and speak on behalf of the mourning family. After fumbling through the required opening litany of greetings to relevant dignitaries, the son read out a pre-written speech:

This day in this home we are laying my father to rest. We are actually very grateful to the government, for what they have decided to do, because at a time like this we were very uncertain, at a time like this you can be so confused, but the state chose to give this fantastic burial, so thank you Your Excellency. Your Excellency, at this time, I have a polite request and proposal. The attachment will be provided.

On behalf of Atwoma’s family – his two wives, eleven children and over seventy grandchildren – the son then requested a tractor to assist them in their farming work, a bursary to support the education of the grandchildren of the deceased, and a school to be constructed to respect Atwoma’s legacy. His requests were received with ‘tststst,’ and subdued ripples of laughter from different parts of the audience; as I later learned, many people, including some members of the family, had found the man’s behaviour a travesty. After listing his requests, the man shouted out, ‘Long live the president. Long live NRM!’ A few people ululated and clapped in the tent closest to the president and his entourage, but the rest of the crowd of thousands remained silent.

The second speech came from a son of Atwoma’s second wife. He gave thanks to the president for assisting with the transport of the body from Gulu to Kampala to the parliament and from there to Kitgum, to hospital staff, family members, and to neighbours, ‘...who went to see in the mornings whether he was still alive, who took him food, and made sure he had juice.’ In what seemed like an indirect reference to the previous speech, the son concluded by stating that with the death of their father, ‘...the onus is now on us who remain. His legacy has passed on to us. There are also now almost sixty great-grandchildren. It is up to us that we must start leading

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exemplary lives. Exemplary lives, so that donors interested can trust us when they want to help us.

The MC then invited the local village councillor to speak, and instructed him to keep his speech to two minutes, to which the crowd responded with a burst of laughter. After listing all the necessary protocol, the local councillor addressed the president:

I want to welcome you to this place. As the local council chairperson, Your Excellency, I want to congratulate your government for the wisdom to give a state burial. I also want to congratulate you for being the first ruling president to step on this soil.

The crowd broke out in laughter and cheers. Once they quietened, the local councillor told the president how in 1986, a group of soldiers in Museveni’s National Resistance Army had stormed their village. The soldiers had killed thirteen people, leaving behind many widows and orphans who had had no chance for education. The man continued:

Here we are actually good Christians, every year we commemorate with special prayers the victims of 1986. Those prayers are no longer about grievances and such things, but to commemorate and remember the victims. Next year, on the 20th of September, Your Excellency, if you do not have anything particular, we ask you to come and join in the prayers.

A wave of laughter and cheers swept over the crowd, and the councillor continued:

Construction of a church is underway here now. Altogether 800 million shillings are needed for the construction. The government can help, so that growing children, youth, can be brought to the church to be taught, so that there will be no more loss of innocent life as was here. We shall not in fact allow you to pray. We shall be praying for you!

And again the crowd laughed and cheered the LC on:

In the place where the 13 were killed, there is a little something to commemorate. Last year, Archbishop Odama blessed a plaque in the place. Three acres have been donated so that an institution to commemorate their memory can be developed. We expect the government to come up with some help. We would request to have three nursery classrooms, an office, and a store constructed, so that the level of education which was disrupted by this event could be caught up on. Long live Uganda. Long live the NRM!

The speech by the local councillor was followed by a speech given by the chairman of the district council (LC5) for a neighbouring district, an NRM man who ploughed on despite a shower of rain which led everyone sitting outside the tents to scramble for cover, and for us sitting on the ground to stand up so that we could use the raffia mats we were sitting on as shelter. After pointing out all the positive characteristics of
Atwoma as a politician, the LC5 addressed the president and said: ‘Now it is up to us to recognise the goodness in your leadership. And it is up to you to show the people what you can do. Can we now unite? Can we now start loving one another, like Okeny wanted?’ The LC5 then invited all the other LC5s present to introduce themselves and announce how much money their district would contribute to the funeral costs. The announcement by one neighbouring district of a contribution of 1 million shillings (about 300 euros) stimulated an appreciative ‘aww’ in the audience, while pledges of only 250,000 shillings were met with disgruntled murmurs. The LC5 of Kitgum district then gave a speech in which he listed the various developments underway in Kitgum and pointed out the many government programs with which the district was very happy, and concluded by informing the president that poverty in the district was still a major problem.

The next speaker – the first woman to speak after over an hour of speeches at this point – was the woman MP for Kitgum district, Beatrice Anywar (pronounced ‘anywaa’). A member of the leading and largest opposition party, the Forum for Democratic Change (FDC), and an outspoken and popular member of the Acholi parliamentary group, Anywar politely raised a number of concerns to the president’s attention: the awful quality of roads; the low level of government sponsorship for Acholi students’ university fees; teachers’ unpaid salaries; the lack of care for victims of the nodding disease; the lack of drugs at Kitgum government hospital; unpaid soldiers in the army; and unpaid death claims for the family members of deceased Acholi soldiers. Anywar also decried restrictions on the freedom of press in Kitgum. Although she did not go into the details, everyone present knew that her reference was to an incident concerning a local radio station, which had recently been forced to temporarily expel some of its staff or face closure after its reporters had criticised members of the government for stealing money meant for northern Uganda. Finally, Anywar detailed a number of requests that she had been asked to bring to the president’s attention.

After Anywar, it was time for speeches by representatives of the three biggest opposition parties. First among them was the party president of the Uganda People’s Congress, Olara Otunnu, whom the audience cheered like a rock star. In contrast to

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47 The so-called nodding syndrome, which causes epilepsy-type seizures that put patients at risk of falling in water or fires, and makes it difficult for them to eat, was first documented in northern Uganda in the 1990s. The syndrome, which almost exclusively affects children, appeared to be spreading, and was gaining more attention in rural Acholiland in the years prior to my 2012-2013 fieldwork. The cause of the disease is unclear, which, as Karin van Bemmel has shown, has created fruitful grounds for rumours about its possible relation to the war. The issue has become highly politicised, with many Acholi blaming the government for its inadequate response – instead, local religious leaders, ajwak, and NGOs have sought to intervene through various forms of healing and material assistance. (van Bemmel, Derluyn, and Stroeken 2014; van Bemmel 2016)
all the other speakers before him, Otunnu, an Acholi from the village of Mucwini in Kitgum, began his speech in the local language:

Leaders of Acholi, of Uganda, I greet you, and thank you for being here. We have gathered here to pay our last respects to Tiberio Okeny Atwoma. God has given a gift to our leader, and that gift was different. He didn’t give it to many people. Fear was not given to Atwoma. He stood by truth until he died... As we gather here today, we show our respect to someone who was high. So we should dance, sing, and in all ways show him the respect he deserves. Some things he told me, I will now tell the president.

Otunnu switched to English, and slowly, with calculated emphasis on every word, hailed the president. The crowd responded to each name with increasing jitters of laughter, and each twist and turn of the speech that followed drew waves of affirming response from the audience:

My special brother... His Excellency... General... Yoweri... Kaguta... Museveni... seated here in the land of my ancestors! You see those hills there? My ancestors, they are resting at the foothills. You relax! I have no worry about them! Now that you are here, make sure you have plenty of malakwang, of odii, of bo, of lakerokoro.48 My special brother... We met to discuss with Atwoma. At one point he went to Kampala to see your doctor, and I gave him a lift. So we were talking on the way, and the first thing he said over and over again, was how this land, this people, this civilisation [with more and more emphasis on the words as the list went on], has produced so many outstanding people to the world: Daudi and Jildo! Janani Luwum! Matthew Lukwiya! Okot pBitek!49 People of such great talent, that this place gave to Uganda, who then gave them on to the world. Who will take their place? This was the question Atwoma really struggled with: where are the primary schools, the secondary schools, that can cultivate such individuals? Public education has collapsed in Acholiland as elsewhere in Uganda. You with the power, and the resources, what will you do about this?

Otunnu went on to discuss nodding disease, stating that he would be ready to join hands with the president to deal with the issue, which drew cheers from the crowd. After discussing education and health issues in more detail, Otunnu returned to the issue of the land of his ancestors:

48 Acholi delicacies, of which malakwang, a slightly bitter green vegetable served with a sauce of groundnut paste, is particularly used in Ugandan newspaper cartoons to refer to Acholi people.

49 Daudi and Jildo were the now beatified Catholic catechists who died in 1915 in Eastern Kitgum, Janani Luwum the Protestant archbishop murdered by Idi Amin, Matthew Lukwiya the supervisor of the Catholic Lacor Hospital who died of ebola while leading the hospital’s ebola-care team during the ebola outbreak in Acholiland in 2000, and Okot pBitek, Uganda’s most famous poet and internationally acknowledged anthropologist.
And then, finally, kindly. The issue of land. The issue of land. The issue of land! The issue of the land of our people, of Acholi, of Uganda. He [Atwoma] wanted it to remain in the hands of us! I guarantee, my brother, that nobody is more interested in genuine development than the Acholi. Nobody welcomes genuine investors, not the fake ones from the State House, but genuine investors, as warmly as the people of Acholi. Madhvani group, if they are interested in investing and producing, why are they not interested in lease arrangements? Why? I look everywhere, to Mozambique, to Rhodesia, to South Africa. Everywhere, the problems are about land. About land, about land! Don’t let anyone deceive you that land is not an issue here. It is! It is! It is a matter of capital importance.

Otunnu’s comment about deceiving statements referred to one made by an army general, widely reported in national media and discussed also in Kitgum, that contrary to what Acholi opposition politicians and civil society actors said, land was not really a burning issue in northern Uganda. After people stopped laughing and cheering, Otunnu carried on:

After the existential threat in the concentration camps, people have come out with nothing in their hands but the land. The land! My people must and they will defend their land. Today, tomorrow, always! Respect their land! Let them develop it peacefully! So again, I welcome you my brother, to the land of my ancestors. I was going to shake your hand, but I understand you are deeply concerned and scared for the ebola [sic] phenomenon, so I will leave it for a later time.

At this, and for lack of a more fitting way of expressing what occurred, the crowd absolutely cracked up, and I with them. Once everyone calmed down a bit, Otunnu concluded his speech with:

So Atwoma, travel well. And my brother... his Excellency... General... Yoweri... Kaguta... Museveni...

The roar of laughter, ululation, and cheering that erupted from the crowd drowned out the rest of Otunnu’s words, and continued until after he had returned to his seat. The crowd seemed to be entirely elated by Otunnu’s entertaining and cleverly confrontational style, yet, entertained as I was myself, there was also something slightly disconcerting in the way in which Otunnu magisterially manipulated the moods and

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50 A group of investors which, with the backing of the Ugandan government, has been involved in an enormous and widely disputed acquisition of what is arguably customary communal Acholi land in the western part of the sub-region (see for instance Martiniello 2015; Sjögren 2014).

51 During the war between the LRM/A and the UPDF, Otunnu served as an Under Secretary General of the United Nations, and used his position to draw attention to the ongoing war. At various international venues, Otunnu claimed that the Ugandan government was undertaking deliberate and well-orchestrated genocide of the Acholi people (see e.g. O. A. Otunnu 2006).
reactions of the crowd. The ferocious critique that lay between the seemingly polite lines of Otunnu’s speech, the casual way in which he mocked Museveni’s fear of shaking hands, and the apparent elation of the people when he mocked the president, all slightly unnerved me.

The next speaker was the vice-president of the FDC. He barely kept the audience’s attention, and they muttered and chatted while he read a letter from the party leader Kizza Besigye, since it was the speaker after him for whom everyone was waiting. Norbert Mao, the party leader of Tiberio Atwoma’s Democratic Party, was escorted to the podium by the audience’s rhythmic clapping and extremely loud cheering. Mao began by declaring that Tiberio Okeny Atwoma was a gift not only to the DP, or the Acholi people, but to all of Uganda. He introduced all the key members of the DP who had gathered for the event, and then continued:

I want to tell you: Things are changing. When it is dark, light is coming. When you cry, it helps, but it doesn’t stop the cause of the crying. There’s a beginning and an end to everything; not pakalast.

People erupted in cheers and laughter at the reference to the slogan Museveni had used in his 2011 election campaign, which had been adopted from the name of the most common mobile bundle in Uganda. The slogan, fiercely critiqued by opposition at the time of the elections, meant ‘until the end’, and was seen as a reference to Museveni’s wish to remain president until his death (see e.g. Rice 2011).

Your Excellency, on the part of the DP, we think we are in this together. If the vehicle you drive is crashed, the driver with the seatbelt may be okay, but the people sitting in the back of the pick-up not so. We have thus come here to make sure that you deliver us to the goal.

Mao then confronted the president with the issue of unsustainably splintered small districts, calling for more viable local government through regional integration, and demanded the better integration of customary land into Ugandan legislation. He then addressed the audience:

When you hear all of us here talking like this, you wonder why there is no top forum for top leaders to really discuss about these issues. We have a problem in this country: when we try to address the population, the police come with teargas! That is why we come to funerals, we come to weddings, and to graduation parties. A funeral is not the place to discuss these issues!

Mao then turned to the 50th Jubilee year of Ugandan independence which had been celebrated only a few weeks earlier:

In the Bible, in the Jubilee year, everything is forgotten: you forgive us, and we forgive you. Otherwise, there’s no way we can go forward, because we can’t change the past. But the future we can. Your Excellency, take the opportunity this year to surprise even your worst opponents. I am still young. It is true, I have
48 years to go before I reach the age of the deceased. We the young generation: we will support any programs that contribute to the general development of Uganda. We are committed to see that nobody need to rise to presidency by walking on the blood of the former president.

Mao was given generous applause, and the woman MP Anywar came to request that the crowd also clap for Museveni. Her efforts incited only half-hearted claps here and there, and many people did not bother to join in at all. After a while she gave up and invited the next speaker, Henry Okello Oryem, a member of parliament for Kitgum district and the State Minister for Foreign Affairs of Uganda. Oryem, who is the son of Tito Okello (the army general who ousted Obote from presidency in 1985 and was in turn ousted by Museveni’s NRM/A in 1986), had been a lawyer in the UK where he had studied until running for MP on an NRM ticket in 2001.

Oryem first gave a detailed account of the great support Atwoma had given to his political career, and then addressed issues raised in the speeches of his political opponents. On the matter of media freedom, Oryem declared:

Media in Kitgum is no different to media in the rest of Uganda. Media, everywhere in the country, is to work under the law: no media is above the law. So anyone who feels that they are being intimidated, they can apply to the responsible ministries, and make their concerns known.

In a similar fashion, Oryem rejected a number of the grievances raised in preceding speeches by claiming there was nothing about which to be aggrieved. He concluded:

It is thanks to the achievements of the NRM that a number of things we have witnessed have taken place. Olara Otunnu had a platform here to directly address his president. And brother Mao, he also had a platform here to address his president, freely and without fear. Thank you, brothers, for freely talking, and for paying respect to the president. Let us thank the NRM for these achievements, which are in accordance with the spirit which the NRM cherishes. If the time comes for Museveni to end his reign, Otunnu or Mao can take over. I will not take sides. If the time comes, one must step down.

Oryem received some claps and cheers from the tent for NRM supporters that was pitched near the president’s tent, and was then followed by another NRM man, the deputy speaker of parliament, Jacob Oulanyah. Also from Acholi, Oulanyah originally joined parliament on a United People’s Congress (UPC) ticket and switched to the NRM after losing his seat in 2006. He launched into an even more pronounced attack against the opposition and song of praise for the president than Oryem had before him:

In this Jubilee year, we celebrate the life of Atwoma. But your Excellency, there is no other Ugandan Jubilee president. Only you! Uganda has been independent for fifty years. There is a question I have really been troubled by, and I want to request humbly that you, the Acholi people, help me to answer this question.
Why, I have to ask, why were there 9 presidents, violent coups, and bloody looting, in the first twenty-five years? And why, in the last twenty-five years have we had one president, no violent coups, and no looting. Why? Truly I would like to find out the answer, why? I tell you. It is because President Yoweri Kaguta Museveni got something right. He got something right about Uganda. About these people. There was no looting. No bloody coups. Truly, Acholi people, help me answer this question! Your Excellency, somebody should give me this answer! You committed your life to achieve this dream! Indeed, you taught us that there is nothing wrong with Uganda that cannot be corrected by what is right with Uganda. There is nothing wrong with Ugandans that cannot be corrected by what is right with Ugandans! We don’t need foreigners; we don’t need to go overseas to find help, to find missiles, to find answers. The first twenty-five years for Uganda were bad, but the next twenty-five years... All these people should focus on the same vision, because it has kept the country together. Never again shall we subject Uganda to chaos, to war, to demonstrations that destroy property and cause chaos. We have the consultative forum, which was put in the law in 2005, and I would like for it to be embraced, because I would like to believe all the political leaders of Uganda want a stable Uganda.

Once Oulanyah concluded, the stage was set for President Museveni himself. The speech, which was simultaneously translated from English into Acholi, opened with Museveni’s declaration that he had not come to talk about politics, which he immediately followed by stating that the deputy speaker of parliament had been correct in his assessment that the NRM had succeeded because of its disavowal of sectarianism. After briefly dwelling on his familiar arguments (see e.g. Museveni 1997), Museveni described the discussions he had had on the topic with Atwoma:

What then was my impression of Tiberio Okeny Atwoma? There is no doubt that he spoke the truth. He was a freedom fighter. How did I know this? In the Constituent Assembly he proposed to name Uganda the Nile Republic. The reason for this was the misbehaviour of Mango [the hill housing the main palace of the Buganda kingdom], where the leaders had been misbehaving for a long time. So Atwoma said that rather than call it Uganda, he said call it the Nile Republic so as to clamp down on the arrogance in Mango. We in the NRM opposed this. Our reason was – and this is my theme – that Uganda is one. In Luo language, an anthem is labaara. In Luganda, mubala means a clan anthem. How do you escape this? Fellows in Teso, they have names like Oyo and Oninyi, all these Luo names. How do you say Uganda is not one, it is linked like this! I said, Mzee Tiberio, look here. These people are either similar or linked. Therefore if one is confused and wants to create problems in the family, he cannot say, provoke us to say we are not one family. My children, if they come to [the president’s brother’s] Salim Saleh’s place, they are at their father’s place.52 So

52 Salim Saleh was the leader of the UPDF through the worst of the war on the LRM/A, and one of the people most resented in Acholiland for mistreatment of civilians (Whitmore 2010a). He was also in
I say, if the British thought we were all Baganda, fine. After all, we are all part of the same group. However, that suggestion showed his Atwoma’s stand about Uganda.

In a surprising move, Museveni then continued with an apology:

I’m sorry mistakes have been made by the NRM. I would like to apologise for the mistakes of the NRA. This thing of 13 people being killed, I have never heard of it, I have heard of the massacres in Mucwini by the LRA, of mistakes in Namukora by Battalion number 35. But of this massacre I have never heard. I apologise. I am sorry. We have bad people in all groups. The difference, and where I would like to challenge my younger brother Olara Otunnu, is that NRM has mistakes, but also the capacity to overcome those mistakes, and not collapse like the UPC has done so many times. That is the difference. I apologise sincerely for the mistakes. One of the mistakes made was to arrest these elders, like this one, Mzee Atwoma. Some of our fellows in the NRM panicked, they thought these people were in conspiracy to overthrow the government. However, because NRM has got bad but also good people in it, it works as a system. And eventually the good system came in and acquitted the charged. And again I apologise for those mistakes.

The president then recounted all the reasons why Atwoma had deserved a state burial, and promised that a technical school would be constructed in Kitgum in his memory. That said, he continued:

For the families of our pioneers, as long as I have the authority of president, what I can do is provide some positions. That is what I did with Henry Okello Oryem [the son of Tito Okello, whose speech preceded Museveni’s]. Now, the son of [late President Milton] Obote is in parliament. If Tiberio Okeny Atwoma has some educated children, I would like to see how I can deploy you. As to Mao, I support his call, we should all work together, have a forum. There actually is a forum that I innovated in 2006. FDC’s Besigye boycotted it; he has been giving a lot of trouble really. Mao gets it wrong saying we give them teargas. That’s right, teargas is the easiest way, the softest way to deal with troublemakers. When someone wants to trample the tomato sellers’ tomatoes, and the police say no and they don’t listen, what do you do? The best thing to do is to fire some teargas

charge of the army during the time when the UPDF was gathering enormous riches from gold mines during their involvement in the war in the DRC (Mwenda and Tangri 2013, 74-75; United Nations Security Council 2002).

31 In 1986, 71 people were killed in Namokora sub-county by NRA soldiers. On the initiative of a Comboni priest of the local parish, Tarcisio Pazzaglia, who lived and worked at Kitgum Mission during my fieldwork, most of the largely decomposed bodies were collected and buried in a mass grave two months after the massacre (Akullo and Ogora 2014).

34 Museveni’s mentioning Obote’s son Jimmy Akena is an interesting move, since Akena, the MP of Lira, is a representative of the UPC, not of the NRM. It seems Museveni is implying that even getting into the parliament on an opposition ticket is ultimately the president’s doing.
into their eyes so they stop. It’s not us who want teargas, it’s Besigye, although one time, Mao, you also joined in. But on the opposition part, Besigye has been boycotting the forum. The National Resistance Movement, we were ready before, and we are ready now, to meet with national leaders. Now I don’t want to talk about politics, the only thing I want to take up is the Gulu-Kitgum road. It will be tarmacked.

The crowd, which had been increasingly muttering disapproving ‘tst-tst’ sounds, shouted out, ‘Goppa, goppa!’ meaning ‘lies’.

You say I am lying, but I tell the truth. The economy of Uganda is now much better. We shall do this road one way or another, don’t worry. All the other issues raised, this is not the time, I will make the time another time. Now, I wanted to see the family after the burial, but now because of the time, I will not have that time. I have with me 10 million shillings for the family for the burial. May the soul of the late rest in peace.

The crowd’s response was almost aggressively passive: a few claps were heard here and there in the general audience, and only a few NRM party enthusiasts cheered in their own tent. A procession was then formed to escort the coffin to the grave, followed by a group of Acholi bwoola dancers with drums. Odama swung the censer over the grave, after which the body was lowered into it, but I realised to my surprise that hardly anyone was paying any attention to what was still going on. People were babbling loudly, many were laughing, and I repeatedly picked up the English words ‘state burial’ amidst the crowd’s chatter. Perhaps because their attention was directed elsewhere, few people seemed to notice that the police were going through an elaborate series of signals and gestures. Above the ceaseless prattle, I could just hear Odama reading into the microphone the final words of blessing at the graveside.

As soon as Odama concluded, the police fired their guns in a salute, which, as I described in the previous chapter, led people first to panic and eventually to break out in relieved laughter. After the laughter and fright had calmed down, the archbishop addressed his final words to the president: ‘May this gesture of your being with us, and this reconciliatory gesture with the other parties here, be the way we move as this country, and may Tiberio Okeny Atwoma lead us in this.’ The president’s cars arrived, and he and all his companions filed in and drove away. Some people remained to wait for food, but as evening was already falling, most people, exhausted as we were from almost seven hours with no food and too much sun, headed home. Mass was over, as was a remarkably show of political debate and entertainment.

Conceptualising performance, ritual and the state in Africa

Drawing on concepts both from the study of ritual (Gellner 1999; Kapferer 2004) and of performativity (Butler 1997; Madison and Hamera 2006; Madison 2011), I suggest analysing public church events as glimpses into how the Ugandan state becomes
tangible for people in Kitgum through its performance, and how powerful imaginaries of statehood are challenged. From this perspective, these events are seen not only to ‘perform’ a state that already exists, but as (re-)productive of that very state; as Gupta and Sharma (2006, 18) write, ‘public cultural representations and performance of statehood crucially shape people’s perceptions about the nature of the state’. While there is much in this performance that refers to existing genres of political discourse in Uganda, the performance of cung i wibye is not entirely scripted. Rather, what takes place at public church events is a negotiation between different interest groups, and a contest between diverging visions of what Uganda is and should be.

Events like the state burial of Tiberio Okeny Atwoma can be considered cultural performances, that is, heightened examples of existing social and political relations (Madison and Hamera 2006, xvii). For performance scholars, ‘performance’ does not refer to a passive representation of a pre-existing reality. Rather, ‘words do something in the world’ (ibid., xvi, emphasis in original). That is, speech is performative, by which Judith Butler refers to ‘that reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains’ (Butler 1993, 3). Cultural performances are thus citational: they refer to convention, to received formulae for similar events in the past, and to established patterns of public address. While Butler emphasises that words can be re-signified, and that speech acts may hence transform reality, she remains cautious about the possibility of individual actors enacting substantial change through speech, inextricably embedded as speakers are in their historically and discursively constructed subjectivities (Butler 1997, 49, 55). Extending Butler’s analysis of the immense difficulty of speech to escape citation of existing (and often violent) discourses, I also find it useful to consider, alongside the citational, the creative potential inherent in ritualised performances of statehood. This is a perspective emphasised by those performance scholars who argue that ‘it is in cultural performances [that] performativities are doubled with a difference: they are re-presented, re-located and re-materialized for the possibility of a substantial re-consideration and re-examination’ (Madison and Hamera 2006, xix, emphasis added).

A resonant view is put forward in Bruce Kapferer’s theorising on rituals. For Kapferer, rituals not only mirror pre-existing or external reality, but are an actual ‘engagement with the compositional structuring dynamics of life’ (2004, 48). So understood, ritual does not simply represent or symbolise a reality outside of it, rather, ritual can in fact alter nonritual realities (ibid.). Kapferer’s view of rituals provides a fruitful starting point for an analysis of state performance in contemporary post-conflict Acholiland, where ‘the ordinary everyday realities that human beings live, construct, and pass through are continuously forming, merging, and flowing into each other’ (ibid.). Kapferer argues that the time of ritual relates to the time of the ordinary everyday ‘as depth to surface’ (Kapferer 2004, 37). This idea resonates strongly with my experience of the public church events in which I participated in Kitgum – and with the metaphor of the anthill – but with a crucial twist: in Acholiland, I argue, the
public rituals of state-making bear a connection to ordinary lived reality as a visible surface that excludes from sight the largely unseen underside of the anthill. To borrow the language of Jenny Edkins, it is the deep, chaotic everyday of ‘the political’ that is held in abeyance when ‘politics’, in its most visible form, rises to the surface (2003). While Kapferer argues that what goes on in ritual is commonly more akin to that which goes on behind the scenes of theatre rather than in the limelight of the stage, I suggest that at events like Atwoma’s burial, the altar, the pulpit, and the microphone stand are the stage on which the ritual of church and state are performed. As I argue in Chapter Seven, however, the ritual of state-making in post-conflict northern Uganda is completed, to draw on Kapferer’s distinction, behind the scenes.

Uganda under President Yoweri Museveni can be described as a hybrid regime, where the president has managed to maintain his control over the country, and to a large extent also the good will of its international donors, through skilfully combining elements of liberal and totalitarian governance (Perrot, Makara, and Lafargue 2014; Tripp 2010; Carbone 2008b). In contrast to the notion of hybridity, Verma has described Museveni’s Uganda as a ‘conquest state with a democratic face’ (Verma 2013, 176). Indeed, for Ugandan citizens, the outward markers of liberalality are assessed against personal and communal experiences of encountering the state’s totalitarian face. Both of these aspects were visibly present at Atwoma’s burial.

Performing personalised, gendered, and neopatrimonial power

Major public church events in Kitgum both reflect and reproduce Uganda as a hybrid regime in which liberal and authoritarian elements are merged, where power is highly personalised and gendered, where political deliberation is largely submerged by neopatrimonial logics and politicised ethnicity, and where the relationship between mainline churches and the state remains important. The performance of statehood at these events is not, however, in the form of a monologue; rather, the state that emerges is the result of contestation and negotiation between numerous participants and their diverging political imaginaries. These negotiations continue in everyday lives, after the festival grounds are cleared up, and everybody has gone home. The state, while not all-powerful, provides critical boundaries within and against which political imaginaries in post-war northern Uganda can be crafted. In the following, I discuss in turn each of the characteristics of the Ugandan state that I mention in the core argument above.

The first point to make concerns the extent to which the state performed at these events materialises in the persona of the president. A striking characteristic of the event I analyse in this and the following chapter is that the president was their centre of attention. It was he to whom all speeches were addressed as soon as he had arrived, and to whose attention concerns were explicitly brought – rather than to the general public, or the government, or even the ruling party. Political debate at Atwoma’s burial was thus two-sided: a troupe of NRM supporters backed up the president,
whose person was pitted against the opposition. Hence all speeches, save that of Museveni himself, addressed the president: the embodiment of state power in Uganda. When confronted with pleas for assistance, or with a request to make Saint Janani Luwum day a national holiday, the president does not respond by saying he will request administrative staff to prepare a motion to be discussed in parliament. He responds by making a personal promise, which he then puts into motion (as in the case of Janani Luwum’s memorial which is now to become a national holiday in Uganda), or forgets. The personal promise of the president is not a guarantee – for instance, two years after Atwoma’s burial, his relatives complained that none of the things the president had promised had materialised. However, Museveni’s word is as good a guarantee as Ugandans can get; his opinion sways the party, dominates a large part of the press and to a large extent manipulates the parliament (Goodfellow 2014; Tripp 2010).

The second point to make concerns the extent to which power is gendered. The fundamentally patriarchal character of politics in Uganda was highly evident in Kitgum, where both the public performance of politics in moments of cung i wibye and political affairs in general are largely dominated by and structured around men (for a detailed analysis of women in Ugandan politics, see Tripp 2000). Notice that the speakers I cited at Atwoma’s burial were almost all men, and even those speakers whose brief speeches I bypass in the account I give, such as LC5s of other districts, were all men. The only and notable exception to the rule of speaking men at Atwoma’s burial was the woman MP for Kitgum, FDC’s Beatrice Anywar. Even more notable was the way in which she was addressed by the president in his speech, when he described how it came about that Atwoma was given a state burial: ‘So Honourable Minister Okello Oryem came to me, and it was suggested to me also by my daughter Beatrice’ – to which people responded with spontaneous laughter. The Member of Parliament for Chua County, Kitgum district (male), was referred to by his title of Honourable Minister, whereas the Member of Parliament for Chua County, Kitgum District (female), was allocated her place with the patronising use of the label of ‘daughter’. As Tamale has noted, while female politicians have shown remarkable creativity in challenging patriarchy in Uganda, they ‘have to execute their political agendas within a historically entrenched male paradigm’ (Tamale 1999, 63).

At various points during Atwoma’s burial, the portrayal of Museveni as a benevolent father was challenged, as when the crowd frowned and murmured in annoyance with the speech of Atwoma’s son, in which he defined Museveni’s coming to join them in mourning ‘a simple act of love and care for humanity and for the Acholi people’. But although contested, the imagery of the president as father and the predominance of men in public arenas are profoundly influential templates for Ugandan politics.

The third characteristic of the Ugandan state that becomes apparent at these events is the extent to which Museveni’s power is embedded in neopatrimonial relations (for
recent resonant arguments, see Mwenda and Tangri 2013; Titeca and Onyango 2012; Tripp 2010). I use the notion of neopatrimonialism rather than clientelism or patronage, not in order to reproduce ‘good governance’ discourse (for a critique, see Abrahamsen 2000), but to distinguish neopatrimonialism as a form of governance from patronage, from which it has partly developed. That is, I argue Uganda is experiencing neopatrimonial as opposed to patronage-based governance, as it is characterised by extraction rather than exchange, a predatory economy as opposed to an economy considered morally legitimate, big-time as opposed to small-scale corruption, bureaucratic as opposed to state-society clientelism, and redistribution only to those with sufficient political weight, as opposed to those with less resources (Beekers and van Gool 2012, 17).

The space of *cung i wibye* is used for the unconcealed and unabashed procurement and consolidation of patronage relations: between the president and the citizens; between the president and lower-level politicians; and between these lower-level politicians and the citizens. At Atwoma’s burial, local politicians requested the president to provide services for their electorate, and simultaneously reminded the electorate that it was they who were lobbying for schools, hospitals, and tarmacked roads – services for which the NRM state then took all the credit.

The most blatant signs of the extent to which the Ugandan polity is structured by neopatrimoniality were the president’s promises of positions to educated descendants of Atwoma in 2012 and Luwum in 2015. In exchange for the president’s goodwill and benefaction, speakers at Atwoma’s burial, particularly those not in high political positions, addressed and appealed to Museveni as the father, benefactor, and protector of his people, and in turn, the citizens who invited him to their memorial promised to pray on his behalf.

The fourth point to draw out is the way in which these events signify the relevance of churches for the Ugandan state. While mainline churches have at times been explicitly critical of state corruption, they are often themselves embroiled in the same neopatrimonial relations and, by extension, legitimise their perpetuation (Gifford 1998). In this sense, it is already in itself significant that such considerable space is given to *cung i wibye* at public church events: not only at the burial of a prominent opposition politician, but to differing degree also at most less distinctly political church celebrations I witnessed in Kitgum (and more generally in Uganda, see Alava and Ssentongo 2016). In Kitgum, some of the planning committee members of these events wished that they could have gotten away with not inviting politicians, but in the end, the politicians, who were themselves on the planning committees of large events, made sure that political leaders were given what they considered their rightful place.

This is not to say that politicians only come to these events out of shrewd political calculation. Just as participating in church life is natural for ‘ordinary’ members of mainline churches, so it is for many politicians. Almost all of the Catholic and Anglican politicians I interviewed in Kitgum had taken part in church activities since
childhood; Catholic male politicians, for instance, had often served as altar servants and attended some years of seminary. It was also common for those in high positions in church administration to have leadership positions in local public administration or politics. But the imbrication of political and religious networks went beyond individual linkages, and reflected the neopatrimonial ties visible in other ways at these events.

In 2015, at both the handover of the Catholic mission in Kitgum, and at the commemoration of Luwum in Mucwini, where Museveni donated thirty million shillings (some 900 US dollars) to the local parishes, with a request that the parish priests ‘come and fetch the envelope’. Museveni did not make it clear whether the envelopes came from his personal finances, or whether they were under some kind of state budgetary control. Nonetheless, the overwhelming majority of the audience greeted the president’s envelopes with massive cheers and ululation. Similar envelopes were also given at parish feasts, where politicians and other notable members of the parish lined up to bring gifts and make public pledges; the LC5s often made a personal pledge alongside a pledge made on behalf of the district.

As Beekers and van Gool (2012) have argued, neopatrimonialism has, to an important extent, drawn from underlying political philosophies in much of Africa, those Bayart refers to as the politics of the belly (Bayart 2009). The case of northern Uganda, however, indicates a particular variant of this form of politics since, as my informants repeatedly explained, the reason why so many people in Acholiland have begun to support Museveni after fiercely denouncing him in early elections, is that Acholi bellies are empty. One young Catholic man explained to me that since the war

the issue of money has come in seriously, and it is the controller of very many things. Even politics. Let me say like the NRM people, most of them they poured money, like during the election, when you go and attend a rally, you are dished with 5,000. So when you go to the village, some people they cannot afford to get 50,000 in a month, or 10,000 in a month, so, when you give such kind of person 5,000 shillings, they will become very happy and, ABC, oh yeah, they vote for you. Because you have given them what? Money. People just select money.

While this particular young man believed that support for the ruling regime was suicidal in that the ruling regime was clearly unable or unwilling to deliver on its promises, for many, the calculation was more pragmatic. It was rarely the neopatrimonial character of the state as such, or the status of the president as ‘father of the nation’ as such, that was critiqued at public church events or in discussions with my informants. Rather, the crux of the critique was often that the spoils of neopatrimonial governance were not being doled out in sufficient quantities to Acholiland. This is why people cheered wildly when Museveni announced he would contribute money to the parishes. Increasingly, the attitude towards Museveni in Acholiland seems to be: he may have mistreated us in the past, but at least he’ll give us
‘something little’ (an ambiguous saying often used in Kitgum to refer to an amount one does not know exactly, or does not want to specify) if we vote for him now. This argument resonates with that of Karlstrom who, drawing on research in Central Uganda’s Buganda, argues that
discourses of ‘eating’ and the size of political ‘bellies’ are thus anchored in a
moral economy of politics, in which the engorgement of politicians’ bodies takes
place within a social matrix of substantive reciprocities, and thus confirms the
legitimacy of their authority. This relational matrix is experienced by many rural
Baganda as more reliable and effective than the abstract mechanisms of
distribution and legitimation of the modern ‘rational’-bureaucratic
administrative system and the liberal democratic state, in so far as these have
been operative in Uganda. (2003, 68)
The irony here is that while the performances of cung i wibe at church events
reproduce and re-endorse imaginaries of a ‘moral economy of patronage’, these events
also endorse the detrimental neopatrimonial governance that characterises Museveni’s
Uganda, which has repeatedly left northern Uganda outside of the social matrixes of
substantive reciprocity at a national level. Yet, in the larger scale of contemporary
Ugandan politics, moments of political debate such as that witnessed at public church
events are not commonplace. As the following chapter shows in more detail, it is not
often that there is space for such debate; for as opposition politicians at the burial put
it, in public spaces other than those of burials, weddings, and graduations, the risk of
teargas looms large.

**Imagining and performing (dis)unity**

So far, I have argued that Atwoma’s burial, and other public church events attended
by Museveni, performed a Uganda characterised by personalised and gendered power,
and neopatrimonial governance. In the following I focus on analysing the ways in
which these events were about imagining community and its boundaries, and were
productive of both unity and disunity. These events in a sense signalled a community
beyond the immediate locality; through their participation, Acholi spectators were,
ideally, to be re-born no longer as ‘mere Acholi’, but as Christians and as Ugandans;
as Acholi members of the Church and the Nation. This was already evident in the
language used; in contrast to local parish events, events attended by the president were
conducted almost exclusively in the national language English, with translation into
Acholi provided only for the sermon and for the president’s speech.

At Atwoma’s burial the rhetoric of unity and oneness was used in the speeches of
both Odama and Museveni: the archbishop called for recognition of the global
community of humans (what I analyse as a reality-altering utopia in Chapter Eight),
while the president called for recognition of the oneness of Uganda, to which end he
repeated his well-rehearsed arguments about the linguistic affinity between Uganda’s
Bantu Southerners and Westerners, and Nilotic Northerners of Uganda. This
rhetorical affirmation of oneness and the concomitant denunciation of sectarianism have often been presented as the reasons for Museveni’s success in the early years of the NRM regime – not least by Museveni himself, as demonstrated at Atwoma’s burial. What this narrative leaves out, however, is the deep anti-northern sentiments that have cut through Museveni’s rhetoric ever since the Bush War (Atkinson 2010; Branch 2003; Finnström 2008), and the continued importance of these sentiments and, more generally, of politicized ethnicity in Ugandan politics.

Indeed, while on the face of it the political church events I attended perform a state and a nation that extends beyond ethnic boundaries, they inadvertently re-make Uganda as a state in which ethnicity continues to be deeply politicised and imbricated within both structural and explicit state violence. Ethnicity had tangible effects in people’s lives in Kitgum, profoundly so during the war, which many Acholi experienced as a form of ethnic genocide. Even since the end of war, many have interpreted budgetary allocation and other such issues as signs of ‘the systematic marginalisation of this part of the country’, as one elderly Anglican UPC activist put it to me in an interview. But ethnicity had tangible import also in individual lives. The name of my neighbour’s son disappeared from the list of recipients of government scholarships at Makerere University and, according to the mother, was ‘replaced by the name of some Baganda boy’. Just having an Acholi name was enough to block the young man from getting a good university degree and, as my neighbour explained to me, ‘Even if we are angry, there is nothing we can do. We have no money to take the issue to court. Our Uganda nowadays is like that.’ Many of those I knew in Kitgum had similar experiences, and the sense of having been let down by the government because of their ethnicity was, and has been, profound among many Acholi. Against this background of lived experience, Museveni’s words of ‘Ugandans being one’ at events like Atwoma’s burial rang hollow.

The relationship between the rhetoric of unity and the reality of disunity is an interesting one, which I think might helpfully be theorised through the lens of Judith Butler’s analysis of performativity. Butler argues that it is not productive to legislate against hate speech because, in defining hate speech in legal language, the law cannot but cite the violent speech in a way that re-enforces it. I suggest this is similar to what is going on in the speech acts I detailed above, particularly Museveni’s: in narrating unity through disavowal of disunity, the speech ultimately entrenches that very disunity. The blatant lie of unity makes the disunity all the more apparent.

A similar point can be made about the opposition leaders’ speeches. UPC’s Olara Otunnu said to the president: ‘Museveni... seated here in the land of my ancestors! You see those hills there? My ancestors, they are resting at the foothills. You relax! I have no worry about them.’ Norbert Mao, on the other hand, assured listeners that the DP was ‘committed to see that nobody need to rise to presidency by walking on the blood of the former president’. In citing the potentiality that ancestors or forces
seeking to depose the president might turn violent, the speeches brought the cited threat to the arena of debate even while denying it.

But something else is also going on here. As I mentioned in this chapter’s theoretical scaffolding, what is crucial to an analysis of speech acts is acknowledgement of their embeddedness in pre-existing relations of power: ‘the dimension of social power that constructs the so-called speaker and the addressee of the speech act in question’ (Butler 1997, 55). While public church celebrations transform the temporary outdoor space of the church into a battleground for competing political groups, the competing groups are not in equal positions: the playing field is not level – a point also made concerning the last Ugandan elections by Titeca and Onyango (2012). In this, the authoritarian elements of Museveni’s hybrid regime become apparent.

Rather than performing Uganda as a hegemonic authoritarian monolith, however, these events at times function as arenas for explicitly political debate. At Atwoma’s burial, there was space to challenge the government, and neither DP’s Mao, UPC’s Otunnu, nor FDC’s Anywar shied away from airing some of the political discontents that fire people’s critiques of the NRM in Acholiland. They bemoaned the appalling state of education in the sub-region, the limitations on the press and freedom of speech, and the poor quality of government healthcare.55 Repeatedly, both opposition and even NRM representatives drew attention to the limited consideration and assistance provided to victims of the nodding disease which, as van Bemmel et. al. argue, ‘has come to symbolize the marginalization of an entire region, including failed delivery of public service and a general feeling of distrust’ (2014). The fact that such critical issues were raised is notable, yet what is equally essential to note is that this space for critique was circumscribed. Even at the burial, the debate did not get very far; because opposition leaders spoke first, NRM representatives, culminating in the president, could close down the debate by revoking crucial points of the opposition’s critique and ignoring the rest. Moreover, the space for critique did not remain stable through time.

Two years later, in the run-up to the next election, church celebrations in Kitgum offered no space for the opposition whatsoever. Indeed, when I returned to Kitgum two years after the end of my fieldwork, and again in the run-up to presidential and parliamentary elections, it seemed that many of the illiberal characteristics of the Ugandan state had become more pronounced and visible, including the deep militarisation of the state (see Chapter Seven).

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55 For more on education see Higgins (2007), on media freedom, Tripp (2010), and on government healthcare, Womakuyu (2012).
Cung i wibye and imaginaries of the state

The Acholi notion of cung i wibye captures the nature of politics as it takes place at public church events in Kitgum to perfection; politicians use churches as 'anthills' from which they address the crowd with their campaigning and internecine conflicts. I suspect that the notion of politics as cung i wibye, and the frequency with which this particular notion is used to describe politics, captures something crucial about conventional political imagination in Acholiland. Politics is a matter of men (it is almost always men) standing on top of anthills, telling people below them what to do. Politics is also the process through which men compete for their place on the anthill, partially through wooing, buying, or bullying, the favour of those below. What is notable is that entrenched in this notion of politics is the potential for violence, since where there are those standing above ruling others, there will be those below who resent being ruled.

When I asked a prominent politician in Kitgum for his view on the relationship between churches and politics, he answered:

Religious leaders are like advisors because if anything goes wrong, they cannot keep quiet, since the government is serving the same people that God is serving. When something goes wrong with the government, religious leaders can come and say, "Sir, we feel it should be ABCDE." They shouldn't say to people, "Okay, come into the streets, begin marching, begin demonstration; I think the government is doing wrong, take up the spears, take up the guns!" But politicians who know the craft of politics can do that because that one is in the line of politics.

In the ideology of cung i wibye, going into the streets to march and demonstrate, and taking up spears and guns, are all in the line of politics. This is why so many of the people with whom I spent time in Kitgum - Catholics and Anglicans, young and old, all of them Acholi, and having experienced years of life amid spears and guns - were so extremely critical of politics. The old man I quoted in the epigraph of this chapter, for instance, explained to me that the reason he had never dipped his toes into party politics was 'because politicians lie so much. I would really have a hard time cooking up lies. So I have remained only with the church leadership.'

Kapferer defines ritual as a temporary slowing down of the tempo of everyday life - life which always includes a chaotic dimension (Kapferer 2004, 48). As I will elaborate in the following chapter, it is the chaotic, always shifting and changing, fractal-like and crosscutting reality of the political (Edkins 2003) - the 'continuously flowing, merging, and flowing' character of life in post-conflict Acholiland - that is temporarily slowed down in rituals of state performance. Kapferer writes of ritual:

[T]he virtual of ritual may be described as a determinant form that is paradoxically anti-determinant, able to realize human constructive agency. The phantasmagoric space of ritual virtuality may be conceived not only as a space
whose dynamic interrupts prior determining processes but also as a space in which participants can reimagine (and redirect or reorient themselves) into the everyday circumstances of life. (Kapferer 2004, 47)

If we think of public church events in these terms, as rituals, the preceding analysis leaves us asking to what extent this ‘phantasmagoric space of ritual’ enables participants to reimagine, redirect, or reorient into the everyday circumstances of life. The question is an ambiguous one, as the following two chapters will show. The events described in them are very different, and can be seen to fall on different points of a continuum between repressive and hopefully imaginative. At some, like Atwoma’s burial, the atmosphere is highly confrontational; at the 2015 events even the space for confrontation was closed off (see Chapter Seven), while at others, the narrated utopia of unity meets practically no resistance (see Chapter Eight).

Yet despite all the constraints on political deliberation at these events, many of them provide an opportunity for speakers to engage in narrating their stories of what is and what is not working in society: what Andrews calls the lifeblood of politics (2014, 86–87). These political narratives also engage the speakers’ audience, providing a chance for the audience to weigh in on the offered alternatives, take part in their performance, and reimagine and reorient themselves accordingly. Writing of poorer Brazilians being pushed to the margins by the increased commercialisation of the carnival in Rio, Sheriff observes that carnaval is

a ritual of intensification in which Brazilians celebrate their own vision of themselves as an amorous, optimistic, unified, and color-blind nation. People on the morro [i.e. favella or slum] might sneer at the notion that their country is a “racial democracy”, yet, during carnaval, they have traditionally conspired in the production of a nationalist illusion. They have done so not because they are the victims of false consciousness, as some have suggested, but because they honor the dream, delicate as it may be, on which carnaval, as a festival of national unity, is based. For poor people of color, the carioca carnaval is less about Brazil as it is than about Brazil as it ought to be. (Sheriff 1999, 22)

It is something akin to this that I suggest takes place at major church celebrations in Kitgum. While all participants are aware of the darker underside of politics, these public rituals, and the religious speeches performed at them, evoke an imaginary Uganda: one in which fear is unnecessary, where societal and economic development is imminent, where freedom of speech is respected, where community is forged through forgiveness and love rather than necessity and force, and where the president really is a benevolent father who loves all his children in equal measure.

Public church events are occasions for performing the state: for simultaneously representing, negotiating, and reconstituting power relations between the Acholi people and the state, and between the state and political opposition. They are, however, also occasions for narrating political imaginaries and through so doing,
shifting the parameters of social and political reality beyond the ritual space. This 'nationalist illusion', as Sheriff terms what is evoked at *carnaval*, which is performed in negotiated collaboration between politicians and the audience at occasions of *cung i wilbye*, rests atop what lies beneath the anthill. To echo Sheriff, people living in the margins of the state as the Acholi do, may be sceptical of the government, and sceptical of the Ugandan nation-building project, but on occasions of religious celebration, they still partake in the performance of Uganda as it ought to be.
Chapter 7

The underside of the anthill

Image 15. Man welcoming the entourage of the Archbishop of the Church of Uganda, Stanley Ntagali, to Kitgum. (February 2015, photo by Maxine Kampire)

In February 2015, two and a half years after Tiberio Atwoma’s burial (see Chapter Six), Kitgum town prepared for another round of high-level cung i wibye, but in a strikingly different mood. In the days prior to Museveni’s arriving in Kitgum for the handover of the Catholic Mission and for the first national commemoration of Saint Janani Luwum, a rumour circulated in town that ‘some people’ – in one variant I heard these were ‘men from Kampala’ – had been inciting people to insurgency in a remote village in Eastern Acholiland. As the rumour had it, numerous army trucks had appeared and people had been forced to burn their own huts and the surrounding bush so that the soldiers could search for weapons purportedly hidden by the purported rebels. There was no reference to such events in the national media, and the different people who mentioned the rumour to me all insisted it had come to them through acquaintances with relatives or friends living in the affected area. The details in the story were somewhat vague, which was not surprising. As one man put it when I asked him for more details: ‘Here, it is hard to know what is actually happening.’
While there was no way for me to verify whether the rumour was grounded in fact, what is noteworthy is that the villains of the piece were not the purported rebel group but, rather, the government soldiers who came to bully the locals and force them to burn their huts. As such, the rumour resonated more with people’s memories of the government’s anti-insurgency activities during the war than with the violence perpetrated by the LRM/A (see Atkinson 2010; Branch 2003, 2011; Dolan 2009; Finnström 2009). It was thus not a coincidence that the timing of the rumours coincided with the president’s arrival. Rather, having soldiers en masse in Kitgum to ‘secure the town’ for Museveni’s visit, as my friend described their presence, reactivated memories of a commonly experienced but silenced past, and led them to spill over as rumours in the present.

This chapter explores the constraints on political imagination in contemporary Acholiland. Whereas in the previous chapter I argued that public church events in Kitgum function as sites of politics as cung i wibye (standing on anthills), and can be read as arenas of negotiation over the contours and narrative underpinnings of political life in Uganda and Acholiland, in this chapter I suggest that the public performance of politics on the anthills of churches gains its efficacy from the rumours, fears and unknowns that remain wrapped in silence under them. As the previous chapter showed, at times some of the confusion and silence that characterises the political in everyday Acholi is held in abeyance; politics is performed as if it were not mired in rumour and suspicion, and the state is performed as if it were not as violent and repressive as people in their everyday lives often know and feel it to be. Yet this chapter seeks to show that even in moments when the space for political imagination appears enlarged, such as at Tiberio Okeny Atwoma’s burial (see Chapter Six), what lies beneath the anthill does not disappear, but is rather pressed underfoot. In part this is achieved through violent repression by the state, but in part through the participation of the spectating crowd. In developing this argument, I draw from Achille Mbembe’s claim that in the postcolony

the champions of state power invent entire constellations of ideas; they select a distinct set of cultural repertoires and powerfully evocative concepts; but they also have resort to the systematic application of pain, the basic goal being the production of an imagery. (Mbembe 1992, 4).

This sense of the state as imagery is also conveyed by the opposition between Acholi notions of wang or ‘face’, and cuwir, or ‘heart / liver’ which, as Verma (2013) shows, is used to denote the difference between the appearance of politics, and its deep, hidden, and violent essence. Verma suggests that the sense of the political in Acholiland is captured by the word lakite, translated roughly as ‘somehow’, which her informants used to describe the secretive, ambiguous, and unknowable nature of politics. In this chapter, I seek to show how the concept of cung i wibye captures precisely this relationship between the surface level and the apparent, and that which
lies beneath. Yet, as the quote from Mbembe above indicates, the surface and the depth are not separate, for both the application of pain (1992, 4), and the performance of evocative political narratives and concepts contribute to the creation of a particular kind of imagery of the postcolonial state.

Moments of cung i wilibe, particularly of the level I chanced to witness both in 2012 and 2015, are rare occasions in Kitgum; between the burial of Tiberio Okeny in 2012 and the 2015 events, Museveni had not visited the town. Yet, just as anthills are joined by the ground on which they stand, so moments of pompous state performance are connected through the interludes between them. It is on these interludes, and the ways in which the state is made to appear present, real, and powerful during all those days when it is not parading itself on the anthills, that I focus on in this chapter.

Drawing on analysis of moments of cung i wilibe in Kitgum in 2015 – strikingly different in important ways to the 2012 event I analysed in the previous chapter – discussions, and my own experiences of fear, silence, and ambivalence during my fieldwork, the chapter argues that political imaginaries in Kitgum are profoundly influenced by memories and ongoing fears of violence. The violent core of the NRM state inserts itself into the private realm of people’s homes, lives, and thoughts, so that even in the absence of overt state repression, and in the intervals between the state’s public appearances, an under-the-skin sense of the state prompts people into submission. Yet I also highlight that this cautious habitus is the outcome not only of the sense of an external and potentially violent state, but also of often war-related tensions and divisions among the Acholi, which are pressed underfoot and veiled in silence.

In relation to the overall question of this thesis, this chapter argues that in such circumstances, the crafting of hopeful imaginaries is significantly constricted, as are the ludic resources which Mbembe (1992, 2001) asserts that citizens can use to challenge and even ridicule the champions of state power. Instead, as the final section of this chapter shows, many in northern Uganda are subdued, as a result of pragmatic political calculation, to adopt a variant of the subjunctive mood (Whyte 2002, 2005, see also Chapter Two) as the cornerstone of their engagements with the politics of the Ugandan state. As Werbner observes, the subjunctive mood ‘is responsive to the if and maybe of experience and looks to an uncertain future with both hope and doubt’ (2002, 15); my argument here thus extends Whyte’s original use of the notion from healthcare to politics: rather than merely a response to the inadequacy and ‘chanciness’ (ibid.) of healthcare systems, I propose also viewing the subjunctive mood as a productive and enabling response to the confusion caused by the inadequacy, chanciness, and unreliability of the state.

**Silence and suspicions**

In December 2012, a twenty-four-year-old NRM Member of Parliament, Cerinah Nebanda, died upon her arrival in a Kampala hospital. A government-sponsored
autopsy found traces of alcohol and cocaine in her body. Numerous MPs from both
the opposition and the NRM, including the parliament speaker Rebecca Kadaga
(who at the time was believed to have ambitions to replace Museveni as the party
head), publicly questioned the autopsy results, and accused government operatives
of killing Nebanda. The young MP, although a representative of the NRM, was known as
a bravely outspoken critic of the state and, according to a reporter who went through
hours of archived videos of parliamentary debate, Nebandah had fiercely challenged
the president on the day before her death (Epstein 2014). The president threatened to
have anyone spreading rumours about the government’s involvement arrested, and
two MPs were taken into custody. Speculation about the cause of death intensified,
however, when state security officials arrested a doctor who, at the request of the
family of the deceased, was attempting to take samples from Nebanda’s body to South
Africa for independent assessment (Daily Monitor 2012).

Some time after Nebanda’s death, I asked two people with whom I was eating
whether there had been much talk among their acquaintances about the matter. One
of them fell quiet, drank his water, and left without saying a word. After a while, the
man remaining said, ‘People are learning not to comment.’ I sighed and said things
did not sound good, to which he replied, ‘Yes. These things are happening. And
they’re going to keep happening. Uganda is moving towards totalitarianism.’ After a
moment’s silence, he sang the first lines of the Ugandan national anthem’s second
verse:

Oh Uganda! The land of freedom,
our love and labour we give.
And with neighbours all
at our country’s call
in peace and friendship we'll live.

In the context of a nation buzzing with rumours about a purported political murder,
the irony of the anthem’s words could hardly have been more glaring. For many,
perhaps particularly in the context of the churches I studied, ‘Oh Uganda’ resounded
more as a prayerful lament, rather than as praise. From the perspectives of most in
Kitgum, Uganda was not a land of freedom, nor one of peace and friendship. In
addition to the experiences of war, which had cast their shadow on the anthem’s
glowing portrait of the nation, the image was further tarnished by rumours of deaths
like Nebanda’s, and by the fears that percolated through everyday lives, none of which
lent credence to the notion of Uganda as a land of freedom.

Among the most often-cited of such fears were rumours that the government had
spies keeping an eye on anti-government talk and activities in every village, every local
council, every workplace, and every church (see Alava and Ssentongo 2016), although
people practically never spoke of the stories as rumours, but as facts. These reports
intensified at certain times: in 2015, for instance, as the country began to prepare for
the 2016 elections, when my friend Orom explained the unlikelihood of Museveni losing in the following way:

You know here, there is a system already in place, everywhere. The state intelligence has officers all over, even in this village here, they are there. I could be a security officer, and you would never know. Or you could be, and none of us would ever know.

‘Even here?’ I asked, pointing to the serene scenery of houses and fields through which we were walking. ‘Yes,’ Orom answered with a serious look on his face. ‘If you start talking too much against the government, they will report you, and one day the army will come to your door, and you will be taken away. And never be seen again.’

While recent, documented cases, other than those of prominent politicians like Cerena Nebanda, were seldom referenced as reasons for such fears by my interlocutors, Cecilie Lanken Verma’s longitudinal study spanning a number of years during which she followed the lives of former LRM/A rebels who were re-trained and recruited as so-called ‘NRM cadres’, suggests that Orom’s fears were not unfounded. Rather, she writes:

I no longer doubt the very dense presence of spies and government agents scattered over even the vast peripheries of Acholiland – possibly the whole country – in the name of internal and external state security and in the form of a range of different networks and cells to which you can belong as different ranks or categories of informers. That makes for a constant flow of – and a constant suspicion of – information and questions that are considered a matter of or as scrutinizing ‘politics’ and ‘security’. (Verma 2013, 48)

As noted by Rebecca Tapscott, who has recently conducted research on non-state security provision in Acholiland, there has been speculation as to the actual capacity of such local-level security initiatives and possible spy networks (Tapscott, personal communication, see also Tapscott 2017). However, I would argue that from the perspective of Kitgum, and my informants, none of whom as far as I ever learned were themselves involved in such networks, the question of how efficient state security networks actually are, was somewhat irrelevant. Rather, the crucial issue seems to be that many people in Acholiland believe state security to be extremely and dangerously effective; they believe the state to have, as one of Tapscott’s (ibid.) informants put it, such ‘long hands’, that were they to take up any kind of anti-government activities, the information would quickly reach the ears of the state, with grave repercussions.

**Past and present, intermingled**

In the beginning of this chapter I used the example of rumours of rebel mobilisation in Kitgum in 2016 to illustrate my argument that fears in the present intermingled with memories of past violence. For elderly people, particularly those who had been personally involved in party politics prior to Museveni’s time and who had been
harmed or had lost family members in the waves of political violence that have swept across Uganda since its independence (see Chapter Four), this was true in a particularly transparent way. But it was also true in less obvious ways in everyday lives.

In a focus group discussion about politics with a group of adolescent altar servants at Saint Mary’s, one of the boys said, ‘These days, people don’t have so much fear.’ Another immediately interjected, stating, ‘No, people are fearing. If you talk, bad people can come and kill you.’ That the notion of ‘bad people’ was not defined in any way in the conversation (and nor did I prompt clarification), was illustrative of a more general tendency for comments relating to security, violence, and terror in northern Uganda to be fundamentally vague. Often, it was hard to figure out what was purportedly going on, and who exactly it was that was seen to pose a threat: former rebels, for instance, or the police, or the state, or the unidentified assailants who featured in stories I was frequently told of murders committed in particular parts of Kitgum town. A similar sense of uncertainty related specifically to the fear of state security. For example, in the discussion quoted above, my friend Orom commented that speaking out against the government would at times be tolerated, adding, ‘They know that a barking dog doesn’t bite. So they will let you shout out as much as you wish, and it will be allowed. But if you start talking seriously, then you’re taken or assassinated.’ As Orom and many of my other informants explained, the tricky if not impossible thing was to know when one was crossing the line; hence, it was generally regarded as better to stay quiet and not speak about politics at all in public, or with anyone other than closest friends and family.

All this added up to a pervasive sense of uncertainty which, in the course of fieldwork, I began to label with the Acholi term for confusion - anyabanyoha - which I discussed in the Introduction to this thesis. In an interview with a woman in her thirties in 2013, I mentioned that I felt like there were undercurrents around me that I could not quite understand. Martha heartily affirmed this sensation, and continued:

· The way it is now. It will remain like that, eh? People will pretend it’s not there. I’m telling you. Unless there is something that has happened, of concern, in relation to the silence that people have kept... It will remain the way it is; that’s just things will sort itself.
· But will it? I mean, does that happen, do things just sort themselves?
· What people now treat are the outcome of the unseen silent – that is what is being handled. And that is why I’ve told you there’s a lot of murder. There’s a lot of hatred and jealousy. Eh? Because sometimes the war has, others have got opportunity to get something out of it. Others have gone down completely. And in that way, society is not even at this level. It is like this [showing two levels with her hands]. Eeh. The fact of the world [is that] not everyone can be at this [high level]. But here, a clear reason known to each other. That you are here, and I know why. Because maybe all your children were killed, and no-one will talk about it, and you remain [at the low level]. This one also knows that you are [at the higher level] because you are being supported by the rebels. Or
you took advantage and got rich. So you send your children to school. And maybe, I did not send mine to school because their father was killed during the war, or their mother. Which means that we cannot come here [indicating equal levels with her hands] at the same thinking. And there is noooo any discussion that will end without chaos here ... If you went to the village, you could have sensed it, even if you are not hearing. You see that? Those are the things.

The village she referred to was one I had visited on the invitation of her elderly relative, unaware that my visit had been timed to coincide with a meeting in which a community dispute was to be discussed, and where my presence would bolster the argument of one of the parties involved. In my fieldwork diary, I described the meeting in the following way:

The situation is tangibly tense, and tensening by the second, although outwardly everyone’s demeanour is calm. Voices are slightly raised. The only one talking on top of the others, or grumbling, is at times ladit [the elderly man I had travelled with]. It’s as if there’s a gas leak, and if a match were struck, the whole place might blow. It does not feel scary as such, just tense, very, very tense. (Fieldwork diary 2013)

While everyone at the meeting was outwardly proper, the discussion that ensued was full of veiled complaints and threats, and the atmosphere was absolutely explosive. It is in moments like this that the weft of silence, and all the potentiality of crisis and confusion that it contains, comes to the fore, refusing to remain unnoticed. Yet it is also moments like this that Martha insisted required such vehement silencing. ‘What is here is there because people even don't want to provoke it. They say wek guok ma oneno, oneno. Let the sleeping dog lie. Yes.’

The things Martha spoke of in this context were related to divisions within the Acholi which, in many cases, had been created or exacerbated by the war. Indeed, the silence and ambivalence that lingered under the anthills of political performance in Kitgum was not solely about fears and uncertainties related to the state. In the post-conflict moment, a sense of the distant state, and of nearby lifeworlds, were intimately enmeshed, and jointly contributed to the ambivalence that undergirded moments of political performance.

The president comes to town

Although these were issues that people occasionally mentioned in everyday discussions and in interviews, it was only through my own experience that I really grasped how the feeling of having the state under one’s skin operated. This learning did not take place so much or so forcefully during my initial fieldwork, however, as when I came back to Kitgum in 2015, a year prior to the presidential and parliamentary elections.

Whereas in 2012 the road from the helicopter landing site to the homestead of the deceased Tiberio Atwoma had been repaired just prior to the president’s arrival on the
scene, by 2015 such emergency procedures were not necessary. World Bank funds and
Chinese contractors had been utilised to initiate a huge construction project to
improve the road from Gulu to Kitgum town, and from there past the Catholic
Mission, via Mucwini, towards the border of Sudan – all in order to buy votes from
Acholi for the NRM, as many claimed. Chatting with my friend Isaac at his office a
few days prior to the celebrations, we were interrupted by the sound of huge trucks
driving by along one of these newly-repaired roads. Isaac’s colleague popped in to tell
us that they were army vehicles. There had been military vehicles driving by their
office for a number of days now because, as Isaac observed, UPDF soldiers always
came in to ‘secure the area’ at least a week before the arrival of Museveni. Just before
the army trucks passed the windows of Isaac’s office, we had been grinding our teeth
about our modems not working. Both of us used the same mobile operator, and our
modems had been unable to pick up a 3G signal since the previous night. After
leaving Isaac’s office, I received a call from someone in the operator’s service centre
who told me that, according to their technical officers, there was no 3G network in
the area where I had tried to use the modem. I was annoyed and frustrated: the
network had worked just the day before, why not now?

And then the thought struck me with almost nauseating force: what if this had
something to do with the presidential visit? Perhaps in one of those army trucks there
was a device that I had read about earlier that year, which somehow forced all mobile
communication into a form that could be monitored by the device operator. I knew
absolutely nothing about mobile networks, but as I had never had this kind of trouble
with the Internet in Kitgum before, it seemed like too much of a coincidence that the
trouble had started just as the trucks with soldiers were rolling in to ‘secure the area’
for Museveni. With my Internet down and the soldiers in town, the intermittent
paranoia I remembered well from earlier fieldwork trips in 2006 and 2012-2013
returned in force. I became convinced that all my text messages and phone calls were
being tapped, and I grew concerned that there might be something that could get me
or my informants into trouble lurking in the transcribed fieldnotes which I had e-
mailed to myself as backup. I had a hard time getting to sleep, but I dared not
mention my suspicions in a text message sent home even in Finnish, lest its content
was translated. While I could rationalise that my research could not possibly be a
matter of concern for Ugandan state security, and while I suspected I might be totally
overreacting, the nagging sense of uncertainty was unsettling. It took over a week for
my technically skilled friends to figure out that my Internet problems were due to my
out-dated modem and not to the network. Somebody may well have been
eavesdropping on everyone’s calls in Kitgum, even without the president’s being there,
but my modem failure had nothing to do with it.

Yet the fear that the incident had re-triggered in my mind lingered. A few days later
I was chatting with a close-knit group of friends, one of whom, Kidega, I knew well.
The young people had spent a few hours talking about politics and speculating about
the trajectories of Uganda’s political development in years to come. The conversation turned to the police and to secret spy networks, and the sense of shared confidentiality led me laughingly to admit that during previous fieldwork I had at times wondered whether Kidega had been recruited by security officials to keep tabs on me. The group of friends all laughed at me teasingly but, while conversation quickly turned to other topics, some of them joked about my suspicions on later occasions. The laughter did not, however, erase my uncertainty, particularly since the topic came up again in conversations with other informants in the days to come. To this day, the thought that maybe someone was reporting my comings and goings to security agents has not fully left me. If my informants are right, this kind of nagging sensation is something that nobody in northern Uganda can ever escape. As Meinert has written, in post-war Acholiland, ‘the trick [is] to expect distrust, and then possibly, and carefully, to unfold a sense of trust over time; trust which might, however, later revert to distrust’ (2015, 126). The crucial point being made is that my feeling unnerved and unsettled prior to the president’s arrival was not only the outcome of sleep deprivation and a lively imagination; rather, it reflected the ambivalences, suspicions, and feelings of not really knowing that colour people’s sense of politics in Acholiland.

Image 16. Advertisement for St Janani Luwum commemoration on a motorcycle seat. Only those with press accreditation were allowed to take cameras through the security checkpoints at events attended by President Museveni.
Cung i wibye on NRM terms

To illustrate how this under-the-skin sense of fear and uncertainty functioned to enforce the power of the state’s performance at public church events, I turn to the two notable occasions of this sort for which President Museveni arrived to Kitgum in 2015, a year prior to his eventual re-election. As it turned out, both the handover of Kitgum Mission by the Comboni missionaries and the commemoration of Saint Janani Luwum were largely taken over by the president and dominated by his agenda, to a much greater extent than had been the case at Atwoma’s burial in 2012 where he had been very openly challenged.

At both the Mission handover and the commemoration in Mucwini, the playing field was completely cleared, in the president’s favour, and no speakers representing the political opposition were allowed onto the podium. At Atwoma’s burial, Museveni’s speech had addressed the criticism levelled at him in the numerous speeches by his political opposition which had preceded his. In contrast, in 2015 the many speeches that preceded his were either utterly apolitical, or sang his praises. With nothing critical requiring extemporary response, Museveni was thus free to craft his speeches as he saw fit. After congratulating the event organisers, he tallied the achievements of the NRM in northern Uganda, to which end he also appropriated what he judged to be achievements of Janani Luwum and of the Comboni missionaries: just as Janani had stood up against injustice, the NRM had stood up against the injustice of the previous regimes; and just as the Comboni had started schools and hospitals, the government was now providing its people with many good services.

The longest segments in Museveni’s speeches at the events focused, however, on reprimanding the Acholi. To this end, Museveni employed a gimmick he regularly uses while travelling around the country, that is, he emphasized his key point through the application of a few select words in the local language. At the handover of the Mission in Kitgum, these words were lotuko (players) and loneno (spectators):

For football, you need both... But when you have got lotuko and loneno in the economy, that’s a big problem. According to the 2002 Census, it showed that 32 of homesteads were lotuko: they were in the money economy. 68% were loneno.
They were just spectating.

At Luwum’s commemoration on the following day, Museveni developed the argument further. He mentioned that the previous day someone had complained to him that the problem in Acholi – the reason why they are not lotuko – was that people are poor. But, the president insisted:

You cannot be poor if you have land. The problem isn’t poverty, the problem is sleeping. Archbishop Sentamu [a Ugandan cleric currently serving as the Bishop of York, who officiated at the service] can tell you how many people there are in
the UK with as many acres of land as you. Poverty is not the problem but sleeping. People must now all be luku.

To make sense of the weight of Museveni’s claims, they need to be analysed in context of the political economy of northern Uganda. Previous chapters have outlined the North-South divide that has cut across Uganda since colonial times and, to this day, almost a decade after the end of the war, the income disparity between the North and the rest of the country remains conspicuous (UNDP 2015, 21). Many of the Acholi lost practically everything they owned due to the war. Most notable among their losses, both economically and psychologically, was the loss of their cattle which were of crucial importance to them: as capital, for tilling the soil, for manure, and for forging social cohesion and security through bride price (Alava 2017b). Alongside the loss of cattle, people in the region have undergone years of physical and psychological torment in a war in which Museveni was far from innocent (Branch 2011; Dolan 2009). In consequence of these factors the majority of the Acholi continue to exist on low-technology subsistence agriculture (UBOS 2014). There are many reasons for the scarcity of higher-intensity agriculture and the low level of manufacturing industries in the region, such as unclear land tenure, low-yielding soils, lack of access to external markets (Gollin 2010), and limited access to credit – none of which were mentioned by Museveni in his speech. Arguably, many of these are issues that the government could have influenced to a greater extent than it has; for instance, the most recent agricultural census conducted in Uganda showed that only 6.2% of northern Ugandan farming households had access to credit, in comparison to 14.4% of those in President Museveni’s home region of Western Uganda (UBOS 2010).

Museveni concluded his speech by announcing that because so much of the money he had so far sent to the North had been devoured by what he called ‘clever people’, he had decided he would no longer allow civil servants to run development projects in the region (for an analysis of the extensive corruption of ‘recovery’ initiatives in the region, see Goloboa-Mutebi and Hickey 2010). Instead, from now on, special army officers would distribute building materials and farm inputs in what was called ‘Operation Wealth Creation’. Two things stand out in the announcement. First of all, building materials and farm inputs do not go far towards solving the bigger issues of political economy that drive people into subsistence agriculture and maintain high levels of poverty in northern Uganda. Secondly, with this announcement, Museveni narrated himself into the role of the benefactor, placing all the blame for the appropriation of northern Uganda’s billions of shillings of aid money on people below him, while simultaneously circumventing claims that the army itself might be corrupt (see Mwenda and Tangri 2013).

In light of all this it seemed there were good reasons for people to be angered by the president’s words, and to express their anger. But no-one did. In contrast to the crowd’s annoyance that I had witnessed at Arwoma’s 2012 burial, in 2015 there were no sounds of ‘tst-tst’ or shouts of ‘goppa!’ directed at Museveni, nor gleeful ululations
at the opposition’s subtle ridiculing of him – just unbroken silence and thousands of eyes staring in the president’s direction. My question is: what had changed to so load these events in Museveni’s favour, and how was it that the audience seemed to accept Museveni’s berating without the slightest indication of protest, when a few years earlier they had jeered and called him a liar?

The first issue to be considered in exploring this question is the reason for the opposition’s absence at these events. This primarily highlights the considerable extent to which party politics are intertwined with the administration of Ugandan churches (see Chapters Two and Three). According to informants on and near the organising committee of the Mission handover, high-ranking local NRM members had forced their way onto the committee and, once entrenched, had announced that prominent members of the opposition should not be allowed to speak at the event as they would ‘spoil the day’. Some of the ordinary committee members had tried to ask for clearer justifications for the directive, but had been brushed aside by the political heavyweights and, ultimately, no opposition members were given the floor.

At the Luwum commemoration in Mucwini, the absence of members of the political opposition was perhaps even more striking, since one of the key people behind escalating the Luwum memorial from a local to a nationally celebrated event was Olara Otunnu, the (then) chairperson of the Uganda People’s Congress, who had incited the crowd to such glee with his anti-Museveni political oratory at Atwoma’s burial. Although Otunnu’s father had been one of Luwum’s close friend – as sons of the same village and committed members of the Anglican Balokole revival – Otunnu did not reach the microphone at the Luwum memorial (see Chapter Nine for further analysis of the event).

Phoebe Luwum, the late archbishop’s daughter, spoke on behalf of the family at the event, but rather than suggesting that her father – who died criticizing the government’s over-stepping its lawful boundaries – might have had something to say about the deteriorating state of democracy and human rights in Uganda, she maintained a grateful demeanour towards Museveni. The tone of her speech made far more sense when she announced some months later that she would run in the NRM primary elections, at which the parties’ candidate for MP from the Mucwini area would be selected. (She lost, amid rumours of serious, state-bolstered intimidation, to the standing minister and Museveni’s long-term stooge in Acholi, Henry Oryem Okello). It is tempting to speculate about possible incentives provided to Luwum’s daughter, or to others involved in the organising, to enlist their support for Museveni. As I mentioned in Chapter Six, the president has had no qualms about openly inviting his former opponents, and their children, into his ranks. But while it can be suggested that the absence of opposition to Museveni’s loneno / lotuku speech can be interpreted as the outcome of manipulation of the playing field at the events in question, and of the political playing field in Uganda more generally, I believe there is more at stake.
The second question to address is the spectators’ silence at the events in question. Relevant to this is that the president’s speeches were not novel, but, rather, drew from a well-rehearsed repertoire of anti-Acholi sentiments. In particular, they resonated with the official discourse by which Museveni has internalised the problems of northern Uganda into Acholiland throughout the past three decades (Alava 2008). This builds upon racist colonial representations of the Acholi people as essentially warlike and unpredictable and, particularly since the war, as both lazy and shackled by dependency syndrome (Finnström 2008). The speeches were thus a continuation of a dynamic that has been evident throughout the northern Ugandan war.

The key argument I wish to make in this regard is that I believe state rituals like those described in this and the previous chapter, figuratively and literally guide Acholi bodies towards submission. While this submission is at times reversed, as when the audience at Atwoma’s burial responded to Museveni’s rhetoric with shouts of ‘lies!’ and critical tut-tutting, overall, a submissive habitus has been engrained among many Acholi over the past decades of war and ‘post-war’. Following Mbembe (1992), this submission cannot be seen simply as a case of coercion and lack of opposition, rather,

[i]n the postcolony, an intimate tyranny links the rulers with the ruled, just as ... vulgarity [is] the very condition of state power. If subjection appears more intense than it might be, it is also because the subjects of the commandement have internalized the authoritarian epistemology to the point where they reproduce it themselves in ... daily life. (Mbembe 1992, 22–23)

A profound indication of the humiliation intrinsic to such internalisation was provided at the Mission handover, where the LC5 chairperson thanked the president for a cattle-restocking program in which 798 cows had been given to farmers in the district as compensation for those lost to cattle rustlers in previous decades. I quietly asked a friend sitting beside me how many cows his family had lost in the raids, which many people in the area believe were silently condoned if not orchestrated by Museveni to snap the backbone of the Acholi. He answered, ‘Three hundred.’ Yet the chairperson of the district humbly thanked the president for 798 head of cattle.56

In discussions about the relationship between the Acholi and Museveni’s state, expressions such as ‘we have been forgotten’ or ‘we don’t exist’ are commonly used. The most concise and harsh of such statements that I heard during my fieldwork was made by a well-educated Catholic man in his forties, Komarach, who described the state’s attitude to the Acholi thus: ‘We are like condoms; we’re used and thrown away.’ Komarach’s likening of the Acholi to condoms which, as he explained, are used for pleasure but get no part in it themselves, poignantly illustrates the intensity and intimacy with which the relationship with the state is experienced in post-conflict northern Uganda, as well as the sense of humiliation that colours it.

56 During the cattle raids that followed the NRA take-over in 1986, cattle numbers in Acholi decreased from an estimated 123,375 head to between 3,000 and 11,000 (Finnström 2008, 73).
In sum, the lack of expressed annoyance by the crowd listening to Museveni’s speech can be read as a result of a submissive habitus tinged by humiliation and shame that many in the region have adopted in relation to the central state. Mbembe holds that the postcolonial bodies which submit to playing the part of the submissive citizen cheering the state do so ‘precisely in order to better “play” with it and modify it whenever possible’ (1992, 22–23). There are certainly moments when this play is evident, as I mentioned in the previous chapter analysing Atwoma’s burial in 2012. However, Atwoma’s burial provides a fruitful point of comparison to the 2015 events. A Mbembeian interpretation of all three functions – of the large numbers of people who crowded to take part, of the excitement that the events engendered among spectators, and of the laughter the opposition leader’s speeches at Atwoma’s burial triggered in the crowd – might suggest carnivalesque enjoyment as a central aspect of public church events and of the performances of cung i wibye. But at the events attended by Museveni in 2015, there was none of the playful mockery of the state apparatus that Mbembe describes. Neither did I see such play in the weeks after the clampdown on opposition protests in 2016; nor in the submissive silences into which many retreated as soon as the politics of the state – the army, or state security officials – were raised in discussion. From this it appears that the ludic resources available to the subjects of the postcolonial state are more available for some than they are for others, and at some moments than at others. In contemporary post-war Acholi, these resources are limited by the vulgar and obscene violence of postcolonial performance (Mbembe 1992, 29–30) coupled with the less symbolic and more direct violence of the gun. Indeed, Museveni’s transfer of ‘development initiatives’ to the army gave him the perfect reason to employ the military to rural areas (Vokes and Wilkins 2016, 592) At times of heightened security in particular, such as the run-up to elections, there is very little space in Acholiland for the kind of laughter Mbembe claims to be subversive. When faced with the inevitability of a gun, that laughter dies.

This threat had practical implications for the rationales by which people judge politics. In the previous chapter I discussed my informants’ view that many people in Acholi were choosing money over political deliberation because of the pragmatic consideration of the acute emptiness of their pockets. A similar pragmatism seems to be at play in people’s choice to remain silent in 2015; even though there seemed to be no immediate threat of violent retaliation were people to stand up and protest, one could not be sure. Opposing the president might turn him even more firmly against the Acholi, hence, rather than rallying in anger, it was better to respond with silence.

‘What can I do at the moment’?

Before concluding, I wish to point to another side of the story. Running counter to the apprehensive sense of uncertainty and confusion in contemporary Acholiland is a down-to-earth commitment to the everyday, in what, following Whyte (2005), can be regarded as the adoption of a subjunctive mood. As Whyte describes the concept, the
subjunctive mood focuses on action, on making uncertainty manageable, and ‘acknowledges contingency’ while evoking ‘possible futures’ (ibid., 254).

A comment by an articulate and well-educated friend, Rubangakene, concerning the violence and suffering in his childhood and the challenges he was encountering in the present, captured a ubiquitous approach to life in Kitgum.

I think one of the things that I have learned, and I think this is written for me everywhere, is that with life nothing continues forever. Even if the moment is very exciting, even if the moment is so painful, nothing continues forever ... All this is the moment we have, all these transitional things at that particular time, they will pass ... Also, I should know that at any point anything can happen. Sometimes when I tell even my wife, I say, ‘You see, this life of ours you see, it’s very painful, or it’s very beautiful. At one point the contrary will be there; if it is very beautiful, you know that the painful moment will be there. If it is very painful, then the other one is also there.’
The only thing is, whatever you can do, whatever you can do at that particular time to make life continue, that is the thing we should do. Other than worrying that, you know, ‘[My employers] have not paid, how will I live with this?’ – no! ‘What can you do?’ is the question I always ask. ‘What can I do at the moment?’ instead of saying, ‘Why this?’

Rubangakene, and many of my other friends and interviewees, bore witness to the power of the subjunctive mood (Whyte 2002, 2005), but also to what Das (2007) describes as a descent into the ordinary (see Chapter Five). Not dwelling on the past or the uncertainty of the political future, even during moments of heightened political tension, but rather taking life as it is given, focusing on the present and on building a future for themselves and their children, is a powerful sign of resilience and healing in the face of the unspeakable horror of the past. This kind of focus on the detail of the everyday through which human beings come to terms with the fundamental insecurity of life, can, in Edkins’ view, be seen as an alternative to logics of violence and retaliation, one that enables alternative responses:

Perhaps the only response to the realisation that nowhere is safe, might be to insistently carry on with the mundane activities on which we are mostly engaged most of the time: bringing up our children, engaging in small acts of courtesy, living our lives, dying our deaths. (Edkins 2003, 228)

Such a response was also evident in the days prior to Museveni’s visit to Kitgum Mission and Mucwini in 2015. Rather than spending their days speculating over rumours of new rebel groups, or feeling paranoid about their phones being tapped, most people I encountered were taken up by concerns of a wholly different order. Women were busy preparing food for the thousands of pilgrims expected to sleep in parish members’ homes and in nearby schools, and the choirs were busy practicing their musical pieces. Similarly, at the events themselves, the friendly banter of people
in their colourful Sunday best made repressive state security fade from one’s mind soon after passing through the metal detectors and body checks.

The adoption of a subjunctive mood and an orientation towards the future were as palpable in Kitgum as the fear and confusion that at times broke through the quotidian concerns of everyday life. Ultimately, the sense of politics in Acholiland – which provides the scaffolding and boundaries for political imagination – is lodged in this ambivalent space between secure and free, and repressed and threatening.

To conclude, it must be highlighted that since the end of the war the presence of overt state violence in northern Uganda has, for the most part, and for most of the time, significantly decreased. A sense of relative physical safety and security permeates most people's lives, in notable contrast to the time of the war, when people’s physical safety was constantly under threat from soldiers and rebels alike. However, together with Chapter Five, this chapter has argued that a profound sense of uncertainty, ambivalence, and fear also affects perceptions of politics, and of the NRM state in particular, in contemporary Kitgum.

The material presented in this chapter suggests that the violence, confusion, and silence that lie beneath the anthills of political performance in Acholi render social projects hesitant and vulnerable to disruption and make it difficult to believe that the violence that has ravaged the region for decades can be replaced by lasting peace. However, as I demonstrate in more detail in the following chapter, amid the hesitance and vulnerability created by past decades of war, and despite the ongoing violence of repressive state-making in the present, hope and imaginaries of peace are crafted, both in publicly delivered narratives of peace, and in peoples’ embodied practices of worship, prayer, and in the simple acts of living their lives.
Chapter 8
‘My peace I give you’
Utopian narratives of inclusion and boundaries of exclusion

God said through the Prophet Isaiah: He will rule over the nations and settle disputes. They will beat swords into ploughshares. Nations will plan for war no more ... Let I and you, each and all, be builders of peace. War never again in Uganda. War never again in Africa. War never again in the world.
(Archbishop John Baptist Odama, Gulu town, September 2012)

There was much talk of peace in Kitgum; words like those of Archbishop Odama were at the time of my fieldwork familiar to anyone familiar with the churches involved in the Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative (ARPLI). But there was also much talk of the absence of peace - and it was in contrast to this absence that the hopes for peace resounded. Mego (mother or aunty - a term of respect) Atenyo, an elderly neighbour of the Protestant Mican, who had shifted to a Pentecostal church due to her annoyance with the Church of Uganda’s leadership in Kitgum (see Chapter Nine) spared no words when describing the mess and confusion of contemporary Acholi life. Drawing on examples from her own extended family, she fumed that young people these days were wasting their lives using drugs, or killing themselves by going to study only to become infected with AIDS. For Mego Atenyo, responsibility lay with displacement camps: ‘That’s where our people went mad, and up to now, people have gone astray’. In even more drastic terms, Komarach, concluded his many-hour-long analysis of Acholi society by stating that it was now ‘reduced to debris’, its population utterly disoriented:

The coping mechanism that our people have [is the] use of drugs to send them into sleeping mode to cover them from the shame, from the shame, inhumanity and frustration that have been [imposed on them]. The result is the highest level of alcoholism [in the country] which is also a systematic move towards massive extinction of the community through self-aided poisoning of the lungs, of the liver, of the brain, to destroy the entire workforce. And then in the context of unprecedented dancing, every weekly music ... as a consolation to an unacceptable death in a mass form. So that’s our society. (Interview, April 2013)

Among my informants, it was commonly perceived that war-time displacement had undermined a common moral framework that had previously ensured harmonious coexistence in Acholiland, a process that in many people’s eyes, particularly those of the elderly, was exacerbated by modernisation and the influx of new ‘liberal’ (a)moralities (see Alava 2017a). In the description of Archbishop John Baptist Odama – whose peace theology I discuss below – these two explanations merged:
The Acholi now, its moral code ... has been corroded. Such that the way elders were being handled and being looked at as a source of not only information, but as source of guarantee of the ethical and the traditional code is virtually broken. [Now] they don’t have much impact, not much, because the influence of the elders and the parents and so on, was around the fireplace: what they used to call wang oo; this was where really their authority was, and then from that one to the chiefs and so on. It used to be easily seen, and directed the whole social life of the people in the proper way, but today it is not so! This factor of technology and modernization has come in ... Especially the younger generation has access to the other worlds elsewhere through the computer, through this telephone things, through this television ... So people have got a lot of mixed, how do I call it, mixed outlook. And in that way, I could say the identity of the Acholi as such, is being played low. (Interview, February 2013)

In the social space of the mainline Christian churches I studied, lamentations over the loss of harmony and order, and analyses of the reasons for all this confusion were, however, not the end point. In this chapter I show that in response to the northern Ugandan war and the sense of societal and individual confusion that has followed it, a Utopia of Peace has emerged within mainline Christianity in the region. Although I refer to this Utopia (which I distinguish from other utopias I discuss in the chapter by capitalising the term) in the singular, it can be conceptualised, following Andrews (2014), as an evolving field of individual and collective social imagination, in which certain narratives gain particular traction due to the power with which the institutions crafting them - in this case mainline churches - are endowed.

The Utopia of Peace, which has predecessors in earlier layers of social imagination in Acholiland, stretches out towards both a brighter future and an idealised past. On a public level, it presents an image of harmonious co-existence in the past, alongside a Christ-inspired vision for a harmonious future that has overcome the decades of violence in Uganda and Acholiland during and since colonialism. On a personal level the Utopia helps make sense of painful experiences, and allows for the reorientation of the temporality of knowledge from retrospection to anticipation (Miyazaki 2006).

The Utopia of Peace is most clearly articulated in the visions of the ARLPI and its long-term chairman, Archbishop Odama. However, it emerges not only from the pulpits and statements of these religious elites, but also in the fragments of visions for a better future that are articulated amid everyday life. These aspects of the Utopia – its formal and everyday variants – share certain features: first, an understanding that pre-colonial and pre-war Acholi society was more humane, peaceful, just, and harmonious – as a whole, less confused – than at present; secondly, they express the hope for, and belief in, the possibility of a more peaceful future for the region; and finally, they posit that the Christian God can play a beneficial role in advancing the coming of this brighter future.
Drawing on scholarship in the field of Utopian Studies, I argue that in post-war Acholi the Utopia of Peace is seen as the opposite of, and the antidote for, the confusion and disorientation that have followed decades of war; it is against this confusion that the Utopia of Peace is narrated, and from which it gains its momentum. The ‘peace’ of this Utopia transcends all the different aspects of ‘peace’ that I heard referred to in Kitgum: ‘peace’ as the absence of war, as an internal sense of peace, as spiritual peace, as unity, and as a sense of social harmony (see Porter 2013). As such, it resonates strongly with the Christian theological concern with peace (Gehlin 2015). A transcendent, God-given peace powers the utopian vision of Archbishop Odama with which I opened this chapter: a Utopia in which swords will be beaten into ploughshares, and there shall no longer be war.

In the most meticulously articulated and publicised version of the Utopia of Peace, that of the Acholi Religious Peace Initiative and its long-term chairperson Odama, humanity is bound together by the love of God. Everyone, regardless of colour, gender, ethnicity, creed, or political affiliation, is joined together in a peace that overcomes all hate, hurt, and vengeance. Here the Utopia of Peace emerges as the opposite of war and violent division, as capable of strengthening and expanding a sense of inclusion beyond boundaries of religion and ethnicity. Yet I argue that as previous renditions of powerful utopias in northern Uganda’s history show, the crafting of inclusion always carries with it the violence of boundary-work.

To make these claims, I combine insights from recent work on narrative imagination and the anthropology of hope (see Chapter Two) with the work of scholars in the multidisciplinary field of Utopian Studies. After outlining central theoretical debates in these fields, the first part of the chapter focuses on the peace theology of Archbishop Odama and the ARLPI, in particular on how it evokes ideals and images of unity. I then analyse the ARLPI’s Utopia as part of a continuum of utopian thought in northern Uganda, and argue that it resonates profoundly with the utopian visions that underlay the violence it has set out to counter. I suggest that because of its embeddedness in structures of power, the Utopia of Peace inadvertently strengthens many of the boundaries from within which it is narrated. From analysing the ARLPI’s publically articulated Utopia, I turn to the fragments of everyday imaginaries of hope and peace. In light of the material I present, the chapter closes with reflection on how peaceful the Utopia of Peace actually is, and with consideration of the extent to which the Utopia of Peace amid mainline Christianity has in fact touched and influenced societal coexistence in Kitgum.

**Utopia as theory and method**

Many definitions and often negative connotations have been attached to the concept of Utopia since it was crafted in 1517 by Thomas More from the words ‘not’ (the Greek prefix ou), and ‘place’ (topos) (More 2001). Classically, utopia is conceived as a social imaginary that looks both back, toward an idealised past, and forward, towards a
future in which society is perfected or at least improved. In this sense, utopias are
essentially paradoxical: they speak simultaneously both to that which is no longer, and
to that which is not yet, straddling an imagined past and an envisioned future. It is
from a sense of disquiet with what is, and a desire for change (sometimes a volte-face)
towards something better, that utopias gain their power, for which reason they often
arise in contexts of extreme social breakdown and crisis. (Moylan and Baccolini 2007)

Partly due to the widespread association of utopic thought in general with socialist
utopias in particular, ‘utopia’ has largely been discredited as a concept within
mainstream social science. Utopias have been critiqued on the one hand for being
worthless daydreams, and on the other, somewhat contradictorily, as dangerous
political programs which, when followed, inevitably lead to totalitarianism (Levitas
2013, xiii). ‘Anti-utopians’ such as John Gray (2008) define utopias as visions that
hold on to the belief in the perfectability of society and the possibility of harmonious
coexistence. Since human needs are always incompatible, utopias in Gray’s view are
not only impossible, but deeply dangerous: because they are fundamentally against
human nature, they unavoidably lead to violence. The solution for Gray is to abandon
all utopian projects, such as liberal humanism and universal human rights, and to
resort rather to calculated realism as the guideline of international and national affairs
(ibid.).

In recent years, scholars in the multidisciplinary field of Utopian Studies –
sociologist Ruth Levitas prominent among them – have systematically engaged with
anti-utopian arguments such as Gray’s. The problem, as Levitas points out, is that
what defines itself as realist political thought is typically silent about its own
underlying visions of the good society. In Levitas’ view Gray’s anti-utopian stance
leaves unanswered the question of who and how would make the calculated choices
realists call for if, as Gray demands, humanity were to abandon the belief that
‘political action can bring about an alteration in the human condition’ (Gray 2008,
21). In the end, Levitas (2013, 7–11) argues that the recipe of anti-utopians like Gray
is fundamentally conservative: they propose that there is no alternative to the current
world order – as if the current world order were not to some extent the outcome of
particular visions for society that preceded it and undergirded it.

Speaking against the view that visions, dreams, hopes, and desires for a better world
are naive and useless, scholars in the field of Utopian studies have called for
acknowledgement of the utopic elements of thought embedded in all political
thought, not only socialism (see, e.g., Levitas 2013; Moylan and Baccolini 2007). This
body of scholarship draws heavily from the philosophy of Ernst Bloch, who in ‘The
Principle of Hope’ argued utopia to be an anthropological given, since across times
and cultures, human beings have had a propensity for imagining and longing for a
different life (Bloch 1986). Despite being grounded in a Marxist tradition, Bloch
argued that even established religion or bourgeois culture, which traditional Marxist
ideology critique dismissed, could contain unrealized cultural ideas, desires and
visions, which could transform present and future society, and which therefore should be salvaged (Kellner n.d.). In this view, utopia appears ‘an unavoidable and indispensable element in the production of the future’ (Levitas 2013, 6).

Following the distinction made by Kleist and Jansen (2016), I suggest that enmeshed within the Utopia of Peace is hope, in both a transitive and intransitive sense. On the one hand, the Utopia of Peace is heavy with an intransitive hopefulness, that is, a positive sentiment implying desire for and hesitant belief in positive change. On the other hand, it conveys transitive hopes for particular steps that would revive the envisioned peace. I suggest that particular aspects of the social imaginaries embedded within the Utopia of Peace, particularly as it is narrated by religious leaders, end up constituting boundaries of exclusion, thereby producing the grounds for new forms of violence.

Hirokasu Miyazaki’s (2006) work on hope, which also draws from Bloch, resonates interestingly with the arguments of Utopian studies scholarship. For Miyazaki, the essence of hope is its anticipatory orientation towards the indeterminate future: interpreting hope as an outcome of preceding events, or treating it as an object of philosophical or social scientific inquiry, thus renders hope void. In this view, the method of hope is to create indeterminacy in situations where established knowledge appears to eliminate the possibility of maintaining hope (ibid., 69-85). Whereas the method of philosophical contemplation, and of much social scientific critique, looks backwards and tends to reify the past as a coherent whole (ibid., 13-16), the method of hope replicates moments of hope in the distant or near past, thereby inheriting and rekindling hope in the present (ibid., 130-140). Despite Miyazaki’s critique of social critique, I argue that his view of a method of hope in fact bears a close resemblance to Utopian Studies scholars’ view of utopia as a particular method of social critique. For many of these scholars, (see, e.g., Browne 2005; Gardiner 1992; Levitas 2013; Moylan and Baccoloni 2007), utopia, as an orientation towards the not-yet, is open, processual, and transformative, rather than fixed, ready-made, and final. The cornerstones of utopia as social critique are what Moylan (2014) calls critical utopias, which reject utopias as blueprints, yet retain them as dreams.

In sum, I suggest that utopias can be analysed as a particular kind of political narrative and social imaginary (see Chapter Two), which derive their specifically ‘utopian’ tone from the fact that they are infused with both transitive hopes for particular outcomes, and the intransitive affect of hopefulness (Kleist and Jansen 2016). From this it follows that there are two edges to utopias as I approach them in this chapter: on the one hand, through an expression of an affect of hopefulness, they orient towards a not-yet; on the other, by virtue of the specific hopes embedded in them, they may promote pre-determined and at times violent blueprints for society.

To illustrate, consider Emmanuel Katongole’s political theology (see Chapter Two). In light of the classical definition of utopia given above, Christianity in general can be seen as utopian in its very structure, in that it extends between the mythical creation
(prior to the Fall of mankind), and the new creation in the future (at the return of Christ). As I described in Chapter Two, Katongole sees Christianity as an alternative to the violent narrative of the nation-state that now undergirds African politics. In his vision, ‘[t]he salvation promised by God to God’s people, to which the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus is a witness, is not merely spiritual: it is a concrete social, material, political and economic reality that is ushered into existence by God’s revelation in history’ (Katongole 2011, 59). Katongole’s vision can be seen as bearing both of the marks of hope’s centrality to utopia: in the intransitive, affective sense, hope is deeply embedded through all his work (see also Katongole and Rice 2008), as in Christian theology in general (Moltmann 2002). On the one hand, Katongole’s vision is a transformative orientation towards the not-yet, one crafted not through blueprints but through contextualised re-readings of how the biblical promise of an ultimate transcendental future unfolds amidst the lived realities of communities that have created paths of peaceful coexistence in the midst of societies wrecked by conflict. But Katongole’s vision is also a very specific, transitive hope for something: a community oriented towards preparing itself for the second coming of Christ. In this sense, it conveys a blueprint for society.

Drawing from these different perspectives of utopia, I suggest in the following that the Utopia of Peace in mainline Christianity in northern Uganda conveys aspects both of utopia as a method of hopeful social transformation, and of the inherent violence of utopian social imagination.

‘My tribe is humanity’

Considering the bitter war experienced in northern Uganda, and the decades of political violence that preceded it, much of it pitting one ethnic or regional grouping against another, it might appear unrealistic to insist that Ugandans can be united. Yet this is precisely what the Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative has lobbied for, most prominently in the figure of the Catholic Archbishop, John Baptist Odama. Odama, himself from Nebbi in West Nile, has been the Archbishop of Gulu since 1998, and acted as the ARLPI chairperson from 2002 to 2010. During this time, the ARLPI, which had originally begun as an informal meeting group for religious leaders in Kitgum, began visibly lobbying for a peaceful resolution to the war. For instance, Odama led a group of religious leaders to sleep in Gulu bus park in solidarity with the thousands of children who were sleeping under verandas and under the stars in towns and trading centres to avoid abduction by the LRM/A.

Odama’s sermons and speeches, which I heard on numerous occasions over the course of my fieldwork in 2012-2013 and again in 2015, sought to alter reality radically, resonating strongly with Katongole’s (2011) vision of political theology which claims:

[T]he church’s political existence begins with and is sustained through the discipline of lament. For lament is at once about memory and the formation of a
community of memory, a community that constantly remembers God’s story of creation and lives out in revolutionary anticipation the promise of God’s new creation. (Katongole 2011, 101)

In such a spirit, Odama’s speeches were typically structured so as to begin with laments on two themes: the general problem of humanity’s failure to find God and all the suffering that followed, and the specific problem of divisionism in Uganda. An example of the former is provided by Odama’s opening words at the celebration arranged in Gulu when he was awarded the World Vision’s International peace prize in September 2012:

Paradoxically, as I take this prize, human beings are still entangled in searching for good life. Human beings are hating human beings. Human beings are abusing human beings. Human beings are defiling human beings. Human beings are dealing and robbing human beings. Human beings are fighting human beings. Human beings are repressing human beings. Human beings are enslaving and killing fellow human beings. All such conditions continue to exist in families, in villages, and in the whole world.

An example of lamentations over lack of unity appears in the words Odama spoke at the state burial of Tiberio Atwoma (see Chapter Six):

[Atwoma’s] passion for the unity of the country, for the unity of tribes: this was correct. Because if we are divided, we fall apart. Unity is fundamental. In Uganda, we need it badly. It all started badly. Now disunity has come everywhere: to politics, religion, clans, even families. In a family, the husband can be UPC and the wife NRM. Some refuse to eat together because they belong to different parties! I am not lying [the crowd responds affirmingly], I am telling the truth! We must hear the prophetic voice of anyone who speaks of unity. (Fieldwork notes, October 2012)

Rather than simply lamenting, however, in each of his sermons Odama moved forward towards crafting a utopian vision of what Uganda, and humanity, could become. For Odama, this vision rested on his belief in the unity and equality of all humanity, and of the possibility for comprehensive peace – between nations, between tribes, in families, and in society – that this belief enabled. In his speech at the World Vision International Peace Prize celebrations Odama told a story that he often repeated:

 Someone once asked, it was a lady, ‘Where are you from?’ I answered, ‘I have found out that my tribe is humanity.’ ‘Where in Uganda is it?’ she asked. I said to her, ‘You know, I have travelled all over the world, and everywhere people say welcome, welcome, be at home. Which then is my home? I have found out my
home is the family of humanity.’ I have found my job is to teach humanity we are all one people.57 (Fieldwork notes, September 2012)

Although he never used the term himself, the content of Odama’s theology resonated with the legacy of African Ubuntu theology, both in its evocation of the sense of one shared humanity, and in its emphasis on reconciliation as the only pathway to the future (see, e.g., Hankela 2013; Haws 2009). At Atwoma’s burial, Odama elaborated on two metaphors for his vision of the unity that could exist between these members of humanity: a bouquet of flowers and the Ugandan flag. As Odama explained, both of these have many colours, both would also be reduced in worth were even one of the colours to be removed. Each person had something to give, something unique, Odama insisted, that nobody else of the seven billion people of Earth could contribute to the good of humanity.

Questions of unity and diversity, and inclusion and exclusion, have long been debated in the social sciences and philosophy, and also in theology. Emmanuel Katongole’s (2011) view of the topic is a radical one: he declares that when a person and a Church is ‘in Christ’, it becomes entirely ridiculous to think of oneself through ethnic categories such as Hutu or Tutsi. Yet considering ethnicity ridiculous would be unthinkable for the majority of my informants. In fact, Archbishop Odama, along with one Catholic priest, were the only people I talked with, or heard speak of ethnicity in Kitgum, who did not verbally display an explicit sense of ethnic pride; interestingly, neither were Acholi.

Finnegan (2010) has argued that a strong sense of collective identity has emerged naturally from the collective trauma suffered by the Acholi during the war (see Dolan 2009), but that this collective identity has also deliberately been fostered in order to reposition the Acholi in relation to both Museveni’s anti-Acholi narrative and the victim narrative of the international complex of aid and retributive justice (Finnegan 2010). This sense of the necessity of integrity was elaborated by the Archbishop of the Church of Uganda, Henry Luke Orombi, when he visited Kitgum in October 2012. In his speech at the opening of a village church, Orombi said:

My Christians ... We live in Kampala, but we come from the northern part.
When a bird begins nesting, it builds a nest. Many sons in Kampala do not know

57 The mantle of peacemaker was willingly adopted by religious leaders beyond Odama, at times by leaders who are less known for their peace activities, and more for their incisive hate speech against sexual minorities (see Alava 2017b). One such was the Archbishop of the Church of Uganda, Henry Luke Orombi, who in his farewell speech to Kitgum Diocese upon his retirement declared: ‘For me I am a peace maker. God has given me the work to reconcile people ... Acholi we need peace makers! In Kitgum there are many fighters, we need peace makers! Somebody who can reconcile. Somebody who can talk peace so that anger can go. What are we going to earn by being angry with one another? ... Be reconciled to God. And when you are reconciled to God, be reconciled with one another.’ (20 October 2012, recorded and transcribed by my research assistant.)
about home. They do not know about brothers and sisters. They know no home. But Acholi is for Acholi! Nebbi for Nebbi! Why do you look down upon your home? I have been to East Uganda, to Central Uganda, to the West. And I can say: we Northerners have a problem! We ask God to save us from this problem. We don’t love our people! We don’t love our home! (Fieldwork notes, October 2012, Opere, Kitgum)

As Finnegan (2010) argues, religious and cultural leaders have played a pivotal role in the fostering of a collective Acholi identity. Although Odama was far less committed to cultivating a strong sense of ‘Acholiness’ than, for instance, the retired Bishop of the Church of Uganda in Kitgum, Macleod Benjamin Ochola, his stance on ethnicity was also quite distinct from Katongole’s radical disavowal of it. Rather than an erasing of ethnic, regional, or clan identity, the metaphors Odama evoked – of the bouquet and the multi-coloured flag – speak to a vision of unity that accommodates diversity. Yet neither Odama’s nor Katongole’s visions answer the practical question of how this Utopia should be put into practice. How should the bouquet be constructed, for instance, when allocating the national budget, or deciding on quotas for parliamentary representation? How many of each of the different flowers should there be in the national bouquet – and how, concurrently, would the ‘national cake’, to use the euphemism so commonly employed in Ugandan political debate, be divided?

Rather than a blueprint for how society should be organized, I read Odama’s variant of the Utopia of Peace as a challenge to individuals, churches, and communities to think beyond the constraints of reality as we know it: to envision a different reality – a not-yet in which one could find one’s primary identification in the ‘tribe of humanity’ – and to find ways to transform the not-yet into reality. Similar utopias of inclusion have been fostered elsewhere: by Bishop Verryn of the Central Methodist Church (CMC) in Johannesburg, for example, which for years housed thousands of Zimbabwean refugees in its premises. In her study of the limits of the ideal of Ubuntu at the CMC, Hankela writes:

The rule of survival set limits on how far people were ready to go in caring and helping in the name of Ubuntu. The continuation of one’s own group’s existence as respected human beings and one’s own religious identity surfaced as prerequisites for reaching out to the other in need. (Hankela 2013, 329)

Hankela’s observation would suggest that the uncertainty many Acholi have felt over the past decades concerning the continuation of their group’s existence as respected human beings places powerful restrictions on the extent to which a sense of a Utopia of Peace, and of national and global inclusion, can be fostered in this context.

As discussed in previous chapters, Uganda’s postcolonial history has been marked by the tension between the need to affirm empowering ethnic pride and cultural integrity, and the reality of a multi-ethnic nation. Katongole would say that the problem with all the visions that have been evoked in response to the challenge of
state-making in Uganda is that they all take the nation state for granted. In his view, churches have been socialised into the myth of the politically ethnicised nation state in postcolonial Africa, and hence speak from within that socialisation. But Katongole argues that the (Catholic) Church can and must transcend this socialisation. Reflecting on my experience of conducting ethnography on churches and politics in northern Uganda, I am not at all sure that it, or other churches, actually can. From the point of view of the Acholi, the problem with a vision like Katongole’s is that those in the position of overwhelming power over others within a nation state are unlikely to relinquish it, however evocative the visions of another world may be.

There thus seem to be tensions embedded within the Utopia of Peace in northern Uganda: a tension between the demand for universal inclusion, and acknowledgement of the necessity of a sense of ethnic integrity, but also a tension between an understanding of peace as a state of settled reassurance and peace as a vision towards which one must struggle. For the rest of this chapter, this insight drives empirical exploration of how these opposing tendencies and tensions unfolded amid the lived realities in which the Utopia of Peace was crafted.

So far, this chapter has analysed the Utopia of Peace through a focus on the public speech of religious elites. Because of the institutional power of the institutions they represented, their narratives carried weight within the field of individual and collective social imagination in northern Uganda. Bishops and priests often live a very different life to that of their parishioners, but many of them also come from humble backgrounds, and retain close connections with ‘the grassroots’ of the churches they serve, simply by visiting and caring for their families, many of which live in rural areas. Hence, although their often evocative speeches can be seen as distant from the everyday realities of their listeners, they are not completely divorced from it, and traces of the publicly recounted and preached Utopia of Peace could be heard in the speech of active Catholics and Anglicans in Kitgum. Many of my informants employed the trope of Utopian peace-thinking in our discussions, particularly when it came to unity, respect, and peace between the religious groups of different churches – something my informants almost unanimously attributed to the teaching and practical example given by the ARLPI. Furthermore, the provision of formalised narrative resources in sermons was not the only way in which mainline churches in Kitgum functioned as sites of hopeful social imaginaries. Before turning to these less-formally articulated forms of the Utopia of Peace, however, I wish to draw parallels between the ARLPI’s formal Utopia of Peace, and earlier forms of utopian thought in northern Uganda.

**Predecessors of utopian thought in Acholiland**

Imaginaries of the past and of the future can be considered as located on a continuum. So, also, has the Utopia of Peace that this chapter analyses drawn on and been influenced by social imaginaries preceding it. Utopian thought did not emerge on the religio-political scene in Acholiland with the ARLPI, for the violence that the
Utopia of Peace in post-war Acholi was developed to counter drew, in its turn, on the utopian visions of the millenarian rebel movements that emerged in the region in the 1980s: the Lord’s Resistance Movement / Army (LRM/A), and the Holy Spirit Mobile Forces (HSMF), the latter fighting against the NRM as well as competing rebel movements within the Acholi region under the leadership of Alice Lakwena. Furthermore, as Allen (1991) argues, the visions of Alice and Kony need to be seen as drawing, to an important extent, from Christian epistemologies and teachings, and also from the way in which the legacy of missionary work had impacted on ‘customary’ Acholi understandings of good, evil, witchcraft, and spirit possession (see Chapter Three).

The activities of Alice Lakwena and other similar figures in Acholiland after the take-over by Yoweri Museveni’s NRA can in part be understood as a mode of self-defence against the violence perpetrated on the Acholi by the NRA, but also as driven by the need to deal with the perceived cosmological imbalance triggered by the violent deaths meted out by Acholi soldiers during the Bush War (see Chapter Four). In Behrend’s reading, the war of the HSMF was a war against war, which aimed to ‘put an end to violence in Acholi and to build a new, better world free of evil’ (1999, 61). Driven by this vision, and by disillusionment with the ability of technologies of war to address the cosmological problems that were plaguing the Acholi, Lakwena devised magical methods of warfare, such as stone grenades and sacred water that rendered the anointed bullet-proof. Through the adoption of these methods, she claimed, the pure would defeat the wicked, and society would be transformed (Behrend 1999, 61). In written testimonies, HSMF fighters expressed their belief that their ‘victory would result in national reconciliation, removal of bad leadership and a return to multiparty democracy’ (Allen 1991, 378).

The radical utopias of these earlier movements have left marks on Acholi society and patterns of thought. Although there is an enormous difference between the LRM/A and the HSMF, both of which used physical violence and military measures to advance their goal of transforming Acholi society, and the ARLPI, which used prayers, peace mediation, public appeals, and various forms of political lobbying to the same end, I suggest there are two notable parallels that merit attention. The first of these is their recourse to, and production of, a narrative of social and moral decay and redemption. The ARLPI variant of this narrative prescribes forgiveness and reconciliation, a renewal of bonds of respect between elders and youth, and the crafting of unity across ethnic and religious divisions as the sources of redemption. Moreover, leaders of the ARLPI have consistently demanded that political leaders respect multiparty democracy, and called for national reconciliation.

Many of these points parallel the early utopian visions of the HSMF and later the LRM/A. Behrend writes that ‘[t]he HSMF ... developed their own interpretation of Christianity, which allowed Catholics, Protestants, and even Muslims to join the movement’ (1999, 84). Contrary to later rebel movements in the region, Alice
Lakwena succeeded in broadening her group beyond ethnic boundaries, albeit only among northern Ugandan Luo-speaking groups like the Teso, Langi, and Jo-Padhola (ibid., 84). Although the LRM/A never succeeded in this, and its core fighters have always been Acholi, the narrative of unity also figured importantly in Kony’s teaching. As Behrend put it in an analysis written early during the LRM/A war, Kony said ‘he had resolved to fight to destroy all those who wanted to fight. The struggle would last until no one had the wish to fight any longer’, and that he ‘wanted justice and righteousness to reign throughout the country’ (1999, 179).

The second parallel, one also referenced briefly by Allen (2010, 257), concerns ritual practice. As the emergence of the HSMF, and to a less explicit extent also the LRM/A, was in part a response to the problem of cen (vengeful spirit, see Chapter Three) brought to Acholi by Obote’s soldiers who had been involved in atrocities during the Bush War against Museveni, both Lakwena and Kony adopted rituals of cleansing and purification for those recruited to their ranks. Likewise, one of the key goals of the ARLPI was to establish, drawing from pre-existing custom but with modification and new codification, a set of practices that could be applied to facilitate the return of former LRM/A soldiers and abductees ‘from the bush’, and their resettlement into their homes (see Allen 2010; E. Baines 2010; Harlacher et al. 2006). Both the ARLPI, and the HSMF and LRM/A before it, drew on customary cleansing ceremonies; both also adopted Christian elements and practices into these rituals.

Arguably, to many Acholi people, at least those old enough to remember the early days of the rebel movements, the similarities between the utopias of the rebel movements, and the Utopia of Peace of the ARLPI, are recognisable. I do not suggest that the ARLPI has consciously or even subconsciously ‘borrowed’ from the rebel movements’ manifestos or ideologies. Rather, since the HSMF and the LRM/A share a cultural, social, political, and linguistic setting with the ARLPI, it follows naturally that both the rebels and the religious leaders drew on similar narrative and ritual patterns to advance their aims of social transformation.

Christianity was by no means the sole driving force of the two rebel movements, but it moulded Alice Lakwena and Joseph Kony, and the structure of their utopias, in important ways. Alice’s father, Severino Lukoya, who took up Alice’s mission after her troops were crushed trying to reach Kampala and she escaped to Kenya, was a catechist in the Protestant Church (Behrend 1999, 174-78). 58 Lakwena converted to Catholicism, and both she and Joseph Kony, who had served as an altar boy, drew

58 Like Lakwena’s group before his, Lukoya’s much smaller group drew its strongest support base from Kitgum, which was also the target of many of its most deadly attacks (see also Allen 1991). By the time of my fieldwork, Lukoya had denounced violence, but as it transpired shortly before my departure from Uganda, he was trying to gain a following for his new church near Kitgum, in Mucwini village (the home village of Janani Luwum; see previous chapter). Since then, local authorities have banned his church from operating in the Acholi sub-region, apparently unsuccessfully (Komakech 2015).
heavily from Catholic symbols in constructing the teaching and practices of their movements (see Chapter Four for more on this point). In addition, the movements borrowed from the Church of Uganda’s Balokole revival movement, which had gained particular momentum in Kitgum since its emergence in the 1920s (see Ward and Wild-Wood 2012). In Behrend’s view, the teachings of certain Balokole leaders prefigured many of the later prophecies of Alice Lakwena and Joseph Kony: ‘the Christian teaching in general and the Balokole in particular opened up a new dimension of time: the future. Hopes were ... on a future millenium, which allowed for prophecies announcing the end of the world’ (1999, 122).

**The violence of peaceful unity**

From a very early stage, the utopian visions of the HSMF and LRM/A became entwined with brutal physical violence, which Alice Lakwena and Joseph Kony claimed was necessitated by the impurity of the external and internal enemies of the Acholi (Allen 1991; Finnström 2008). While the Utopia of Peace in mainline Christianity in northern Uganda has not adopted this form of violence, in the following I suggest that it too was imbued with the violence inherent in boundary-making between those already included within the sphere of harmonious coexistence, and those outside it. Furthermore, in terms that are strikingly similar to those used earlier by Lakwena and Kony, those outside the boundaries are often deemed impure and sinful.

At the Advent service of 2012, the presiding missionary priest at Saint Mary’s emphasised Advent as a time for purification, for attentiveness, and for concentrating on Christ. He spoke of how Jeremiah (29:11) had a vision for the future, and of how for us also, there would be a future, a way out of the terrible times our corrupt society was enduring, if only we looked to Jesus. The priest then shifted attention from the plural ‘you’ (originally the Israelites in exile), to the many individual ‘yous’ gathered to hear his sermon:

> At Advent, you must watch yourselves ... Debauchery, drunkenness, cares of life: these are the things that take us away from God. It is like the teaching of modern society, of this so-called freedom, that you are free to do whatever. Like drunkenness, in all forms, not only alcohol. Also this dancing: the youth, they go to dance all night. Youth, you become stupid that way, it is like a drug. Jesus tells us: watch yourself, for in these easy ways we can spoil ourselves. (Fieldwork notes, November 2012)

The Utopia of Peace that has emerged within mainline Christianity in postwar northern Uganda posits societal and individual peace in Christ as the ultimate antidote to war, violence, and ‘confusion’. Ultimately, it seeks to (re)establish harmonious relations within the family and the clan, and to lead humankind to believe in Christ. The fundamental violence of this Utopia thus lies in the violence
inherent to the construction of boundaries between inclusion and exclusion, and in the attempts to stabilise the moral order among those included.

Moreover, the Utopia of Peace is hostage to its embeddedness in particular constellations of moral, political, ethnic, and religious power. Its potential to alter social reality is conditioned and circumvented by the influential role played by a fairly homogenous group of old men in defining the content of public renditions of visions of peace. As Baines (2007) and Porter (2016) show, religious leaders, as well as cultural leaders such as members of the Acholi cultural institution Acholi kel Kwaro, embody the patriarchy and gerontocracy of contemporary Acholi society. Similarly, the view that authoritative bodies have a particular responsibility in steering society towards fulfilment of the Utopian ideal is an integral component of the Utopia of Peace in northern Uganda. As Archbishop Odama himself put it at the end of his sermon at Atwoma’s burial:

God says ‘You don’t know the hour! That is reserved to me, God. Be ready. That’s all I ask. Do the good I’ve asked you to do with the rest of those who are my images!’ This is a big challenge for leaders, whether they be religious, political, or cultural leaders. If we don’t steer the people correctly to God, you are dooming them! Parents, if you don’t steer your children, you are dooming them! Teachers, if you do not steer your students in the right way, you are dooming them! ... At the final judgement God will ask you why you haven’t done that! (Fieldwork notes, October 2012)

Although I argue that the preaching on unity by clerics like Odama has been important for the construction of peaceful coexistence in the aftermath of war in Acholiland, the fact that religious elites are largely urban, male, and materially well-off renders the Utopia of Peace, at least the religious elite’s public renditions of it, a predominantly patriarchal, gerontocratic and, as I argue in detail elsewhere, heteronormative project (Alava 2017b). As I discuss in more detail in the following chapter, despite all its outspoken attempts to move in the opposite direction, the Utopia remains hostage to the social, political, class, and gender locations from which it is promoted, and the boundaries surrounding them (see Chapter Two, and Warner 2002). Hence it reconstructs these very boundaries even when claiming and aiming to break them.

Churches as sites for hopeful orientations of temporality

The previous analysis has focused on elements of publicly articulated ‘elite visions’ as components of the Utopia of Peace in mainline Christianity in northern Uganda. But the Utopia of Peace was not moulded and evoked merely in public and through public address. In this part of the chapter, I turn to analysing the Utopia of Peace as it emerges from fragments of future-oriented hopeful imaginaries articulated and embodied in everyday lives. I argue that, for my informants, it took the form of a sense of inner peace, of destiny and purpose, and of there being hope for a future where
things would get better. In this way, the Utopia of Peace simultaneously makes sense of the painful past, and turns the minds of its adherents towards the brighter future possible in the not-yet. It allows individual Christians and church communities to overcome the violence of life during the war, and to concentrate on the ways in which things are getting better. While constantly relating to, and drawing from, an idealised ‘better’ pre-war or pre-colonial past, the Utopia is oriented towards a future in which social harmony is again re-established through forgiveness, a return to a proper morality, and, for my Christian informants, through prayer, praise, and God.

Kidega, a Catholic man in his thirties, explained to me that he rarely prayed on Sundays, but often went many times a week for the morning mass, saying, ‘It keeps me organised. It gets me focused.’ He continued by stating that, ‘Here, people go because that’s what they do. You can’t just fade out of it.’ Going to church was a habit for many, followed without particular reflection, yet for Kidega it served a purpose since it helped him to keep organized and focused. For others, the purpose was different. Recall the young woman I introduced in Chapter Five, Sarah, who told me that she was tough on the outside, but that if I looked inside her, I would not survive. She had been through a lot of hardship in her life, both during her childhood in the midst of war and after the war ended, yet nothing in her demeanour suggested her experiences. When I asked her what made her give hours of her time every week for the volunteer tasks she took on at church, Sarah answered:

Aah, it’s not something very big. I go there because that’s the only place that can give me peace. I can get my comfort, I can see my faith. You get the point? I feel very safe when I’m in church. Very safe. Since from the time I started joining in Sunday school, I really love church. And if I don’t pray, on any Sundays, really I feel bad. (Interview, February 2013)

It is remarkable that she first begins by asserting that ‘it is not something very big’, yet it is a practice that makes her feel ‘very safe’: ‘safe’ in fact being something rather big in her circumstances. The sense of safety and what I would call ‘inner peace’ was cultivated by both words and embodied practices in church services. Peace was a major feature of liturgy at these churches, most noticeably at the Catholic Church, where the Lord’s Prayer was followed each Sunday with a prayer for peace: ‘Lord Jesus Christ, you said to your apostles: I leave you peace, my peace I give you. Look not on our sins, but on the faith of your Church, and grant us the peace and unity of your kingdom where you live for ever and ever.’ Almost every Sunday, the prayer was followed by a hymn which many people, even some of those who rarely sang along to any of the others, joined in singing:

May the peace of the Lord be with you – with your friends and your family, too. Let it be and let it grow and everywhere you go may the peace of the Lord follow you.
Image 17. Town Parish choir stays behind to praise together after Sunday morning service.

Image 18. People wave palm leaves at the outside service held at the Mission on Palm Sunday.
A sense of peace was not cultivated by words alone, but also by numerous aesthetic and embodied ritual elements of church services. The importance of these was rarely elaborated by my informants but, rather, indirectly referenced in comments about church services as moments of peace, calm, and focus. The impact of the aesthetic and the non-verbally ritualised was manifest in the demeanours of the people I observed around me at church on quiet, calm Sunday mornings, when the early morning sun leaked in through the stained-glass windows, lighting the paintings and floor tiling at Saint Mary's church, or lending a sparkle to the year-round red-and-silver Christmas decorations at the Town Parish. Each Sunday, the hundreds of bodies gathered in the churches seemed to fall into a joint rhythm of breathing, led by the elegance and precision of the movements of the priests, catechists, and altar boys performing the Catholic liturgy, under the predictable and always repeated order of service at both churches. Amid the often hectic pace of fieldwork and family life, there was much that quietened my own mind and body in these embodied rituals, and a similar quietening was evident in those around me. My notes from church services often describe the expressions of calm, often of boredom, but also of happiness and elation, of those sitting beside me in church, singing along to the Catholic hymns, or clapping and ululating during the praise choruses at Town Parish. Through these embodied practices, mainline churches cultivated in their members a sense of internal contentment, peace, and hope.

This sense was summarised by a praise song that was regularly sung at the Town Parish. As I will discuss in more detail in the following chapter, this parish had recently overcome years of serious in-fighting and division, and in interviews and informal discussions, members of the parish often expressed excitement over how things were again moving forward in church. Even the choir was back in swing, and led the parish almost every Sunday in a song that encapsulates a sense of hope and future-orientation that I think was a key to why the church was experienced as meaningful by its members. The English verses of the hymn, which was repeated in Swahili and English for minutes on end, went like this:

Things are getting better, things are getting better!
When the Lord is on my side, things are getting better,
things are getting better, things are getting better!

Things are already better, things are already better!
When the Lord is on my side, things are already better,
things are already better, things are already better!

Between services, I had learned about the situations of some of the choir members: of their desperate search for work, and the frustration those with work experienced in face of the insufficiency of their salaries – situations Hage (2009) aptly refers to as ‘stuckedness’. I had heard the life stories of those singing, some of whom had shared with me horrific memories of war that they carried with them and, as I discussed in
Chapter Five, I knew that similar and worse memories were carried in silence by others. Yet the same life stories made it easy to understand their conviction that things were getting better. Now the parish was singing without gunfire in the distance; people were cultivating their own food, and were no longer dependent on food aid. Even the split in the church was being healed. Things were getting better, and for many of the Christians I knew in Kitgum, this was radical and insurmountable proof of the Lord’s being on their side.

In the song, the reorientation of temporality was radical: rather than dwelling on the past, it was the future, and the future-oriented present, that was determined to be worth knowing and talking about (Miyazaki 2006). A similar chorus that really got the Town Parish going, with people dancing, clapping, and singing, the little church reverberating with the energetic acoustic praise, consisted of a short and to-the-point line: ‘When Jesus says yes nobody can say no.’ Never mind that Christians as much as other Acholis were confronted by one obstacle after another; that plenty of gatekeepers seemed to be saying no to them, blocking their plans, and blighting their hopes. The peace of mind provided by the churches’ proffered faith in a better future pulsed through the choir’s energetic praise songs, into those of us singing, and into the parish we were leading in praise: the church was our peace. However, as the following chapter will show in more detail, a spiritually endowed sense of peace mingled and merged with the material realities of Acholi Christians’ lives, and played out within the moral economies of their churches.

Utopia – or critical utopia?

I have argued in this chapter that in the aftermath of war in northern Uganda, a social imaginary that I refer to as the Utopia of Peace, has emerged in mainline Christian churches in the region. On an individual level, it has facilitated leaving the painful past behind and orienting towards the future. On a communal and social level, the Utopia of Peace has enabled a move towards reconciliation and the bridging of ethnic and religious boundaries, thus contributing to post-conflict reconciliation in Uganda. I have, however, also claimed that this social imaginary functions through the creation of boundaries of exclusion, and that it is deeply constricted by its embeddedness in relations of class, gender, and age.

In light of this, the question I explore in the final pages of this Chapter is whether the Utopia of Peace is better conceptualised as the kind of utopia that provides a closed-off blueprint for society, or as an open-ended, transformational critical utopia, as advocated by Utopian Studies scholars like Levitas (2013) and Moylan and Baccolini (2007). To answer this, I return to the work of Hirokasu Miyazaki, who, employing insight from Ernst Bloch (1986), suggests that replicating hope in ethnographic writing demands the disavowal of teleological conceptualisations of the world: ‘There is no God’s plan, no essential disposition of the world that will automatically unfold’. In this Blochian view, one similar to that of Utopian Studies
scholars, the direction of the world is indeterminate – not predetermined (Miyazaki 2006, 15). In contrast, the Christian vision of Catholic and Anglican Acholi clerics, and of the Ugandan theologian Katongole whom I have used in this chapter’s analysis, leaves far less space for indeterminacy: lying on the ultimate horizon of their visions is the imminent coming of Christ. Yet, as I have mentioned above, the precise content of how that day will come is never discussed either by Katongole or by Odama; moreover, for the ARLPI, which joins together Protestants, Catholics, Muslims, and Pentecostals, the question is by definition avoided. Thus, despite its orientation towards an eschatological future in Christ, the focus of the Utopia of Peace in mainline Christianity is in fact ultimately on the present: the anticipation of the future is employed in the task of lamentation and transformation – of selves, societies, and the world – in the present.

Thus there is no conclusive answer to the question I pose – whether the Utopia of Peace is a closed-off and ultimately violent system as Gray (2008) argues all utopias to be, or whether it conveys the transformative potential evoked by Utopian Studies scholars (Levitas 2013; Moylan and Baccolini 2007). Instead, I suggest the Utopia of Peace, imbued as it is with hope of the intransitive and transitive sort (Kleist and Jansen 2016), and since it takes the form of a field of imagination rather than a ready-made narrative set in stone, evades strict definition. A number of points emerge. To start with, the Utopia of Peace provides a model for a very different politics to that of cung i wilbye: of harsh power play on anthills undergirded by lingering threats of violence (see Chapters Five and Six). In contrast to the prevailing political climate in Uganda, in which nothing is left open for genuine political debate or negotiation, and in which there is very little forgiveness for past sins whether individual or collective, the Christian Utopia of Peace, predicated as it narratively is on forgiveness and reconciliation, turns its back on the past, and opens up towards the future.

In so far as the publicly articulated vision – the transitive hope – of the ARLPI promotes the strengthening of the gerontocratic and patriarchal order as the solution to conditions of ‘confusion’ in Acholi land, its Utopia of Peace can be seen to reproduce violent structures in Acholi society. Yet the same Utopia also transgresses existing violent boundaries of exclusion, and seeks to create new communities of inclusion. Furthermore, through its nurturing of an intransitive affect of hopefulness, the ARLPI’s vision of peacemakers and an end to war is one that individual Christians and communities wrecked by violence have drawn on to orientate their lives towards the future and out of the painful past.

In this context, the current crises for which my informants, and Acholi society as a whole, are seeking solutions should be born in mind. At present, there are serious concerns over alcoholism in Acholi land, over violence in families, and over the loss of purpose and direction in young people. Not only Acholi religious leaders, but also many of my key informants, young, well-educated, and actively practicing Catholic and Anglican youth, were of the opinion that in these circumstances, order was essential,
because without it, there could only be more chaos (Alava 2017a). My young friends often articulated these concerns in different ways to the old. Yet they too agreed with elders that something had to be done, particularly those who were struggling to make a living and steer not only their own families, but also their younger siblings, some of whom were, in my friends’ views, ‘lost’: unemployed, drinking, gambling, or risking getting infected with HIV (see also Olsson 2016 173, 190-193). It is in this context of ‘confusion’ that the Utopia of Peace that I have analysed in this chapter has emerged among mainline churches, in what I suggest be seen as an attempt to contribute to re-imagining community in Acholi society after decades of war.

Finally, however, while I argue that the Catholic and Anglican Church have played important societal and political roles in Uganda, historically as well as in the present, there are very few grounds for claiming that the churches’ vision of peace is embraced across Acholi society, or even noted. Not only is the ‘peacefulness’ of the Christian narrative of peace in northern Uganda problematic in ways I have discussed in this chapter, and the actual reality of inter- and intra-church relations often so ridden with conflict as to render words of peace rather hollow (see next chapter), there are also considerable limits to the significance of this narrative in the first place. Church teaching on peace was highly visible and audible in the largely ecclesiastic spaces in which I conducted my fieldwork, but it is far less so in other spaces, for instance in those less defined by Christianity. Furthermore, even within the ‘highly Christian’ social locations that I studied, the power of the church to define the ways in which its members orientate themselves towards life is notably constricted (see Alava 2017b). To elucidate this point, and to draw this chapter to a close, I return to a moment of important realisation during my fieldwork.

The passing of the parade

In April 2013, just a few days before we left Kitgum to return to our home in Finland, the Catholic Church arranged an ecumenical Peace Week in Kitgum Town. The timing seemed impeccable, with the event allowing me to gather one last round of fascinating data on some of the core issues of my research. The event began with a procession headed by Catholic, Anglican, Muslim, and Pentecostal clerics, who walked approximately two kilometres from the Catholic Mission to the event location on the other side of the town.

Just before leaving to join the procession, I decided to take my four- and two-year-old boys with me. The extempore choice turned out to be a disaster. The crowd of some 200 people, the announcements and music being played from the loudspeakers on the back of a pick-up truck in the middle of the procession, and the heat of the early afternoon soon broke my older boy’s resolve and had him overwhelmed and sobbing by the side of the road. As the procession started down the hill, and just as I was despairing that I would have to return home with Eemil and miss everything, my husband drove past us and collected our sobbing boy.
Image 19. Religious leaders at the Peace Week procession. (Kitgum, April 2013)

Image 20. Students of the Catholic girls’ school at Kitgum Mission prepare for the procession launching Peace Week. (Kitgum, April 2013)
Annoyed as I was at the time for missing the procession, these unexpected events brought my attention to something I would likely have overlooked had I walked into town in the middle of the singing and clapping group. In my fieldwork diary, I wrote:

I start to walk to town with Wilho strapped to my back, imagining that I will catch up with the procession, but I never do: I am too far and they are walking too fast. The striking thing about walking a little bit away from the procession – slightly behind them at first, and in town along parallel streets so as to cut some corners – is to realise how life remains at its normal pace on streets the procession doesn’t pass through, and very soon resumes its normal pace on those it does, after the procession has passed. It’s symbolic, perhaps, of how little this Ecumenical Peace Week touches the day-to-day life of the town. In one of the opening speeches at the event, someone says, ‘It is clear that we will leave this place changed, it is unavoidable.’ I’m just not so sure. Rather, I felt very cynical after today’s experience at the Peace Week. I felt I had heard the speeches before. During the group discussion on peace, reconciliation, and politics, where I listened in on the group for religious leaders, I had to bite my tongue not to stand up and say ‘Come on guys! How about looking into yourselves as well; into your relationships among the churches, into your own corruption, into your own injustices? How about working on those things before going on these rampages about the shortfalls of others?’ (Fieldwork notes, April 2013)

It is these issues – the relationships among the churches and the politics within the churches – to which I turn in the final analytical chapter. Here, suffice it to say that although the event itself left me feeling cynical, looking back at the statement made by the Peace Week speaker with a few years’ hindsight, I believe he was right. It is clear that the religious gatherings – Sunday services at which our choir sang at Town Parish; the public church events at which politicians and clergy offered competing political narratives for their audiences to embrace or denounce; or events for talking specifically of peace as arranged by the ARLPI – had left, and continued to leave, Acholi society changed. As performative practices and rituals, they matter. Without all these events, without mainline churches, and without the Utopia of Peace they have contributed to crafting, Kitgum, AcholiLand, and Uganda would be a different place.
Chapter 9

Confusion in the church

‘This is Henni Alava. She’s studying all the mess in the churches.’ The words with which one Catholic Acholi priest introduced me to another – though disconcerting for me at the time – capture something essential. Much of what goes on in churches in Kitgum that interested me and that I spent my time asking questions about – quarrels between factions; contestation over resources; rumours about the theologically unsound teaching or behaviour of one Christian or another; debates about the precise location of boundaries between church and that of their neighbours; speculation about the political allegiances of bishops; disgruntlement over the allocation of church scholarships, and so on – were looked upon as mess. In my mind, I intuitively categorized this mess as ‘church politics’ but, as my informants told me, such a term does not translate directly into Acholi. The closest equivalent, I was told, would be anyobanyoba i eklesea if speaking with a Catholic, or anyobanyoba i kanica for a Protestant: confusion in the church. It is this mess and confusion, and how those who encountered it understood it and came to terms with it, that this chapter discusses.

In addition to drawing together threads from previous chapters so as to conclude this study’s over-all analysis of confusion, and dealing with confusion, in post-war Acholiland, this chapter also takes a cue from, and issue with, Paul Gifford’s (2008, 2015) claim that mainline Christianity in Africa ‘is not obviously about relating to the divine; it is most obviously about access to Western resources and the whole range of things this brings: education, employment, modernisation, global opportunities’ (Gifford 2008, 278). Where Gifford makes a valid point is in his emphasis of the significance of the resource flows channelled by mainline churches in Africa (ibid., see also Christiansen 2010; Jones 2013). In a situation where the continent as a whole is becoming increasingly marginalised from the global economy (Bayart 2000; Ferguson 2006), the magnitude of these flows sets them apart from other types of revenue to which churches typically have access, and lead to very particular types of relations: what in Bayartian (2000) terms could be called the extraversion of African Christian churches.

However, there are two points in Gifford’s claims that require comment. First of all, although external resources are clearly important to the constitution of mainline Christianity, it is misleading to conceptualise them as something entirely unique that is now shaping Christianity in Africa. Rather, the fact that the churches acquire material support from their missionary or NGO patrons should be seen as but one aspect of the material embeddedness of religious institutions (see Chapter Three; Alava 2016) alongside, for instance, churches’ garnering of support from their political
patrons and local members (see e.g. Alava and Ssentongo 2016; Bompani 2016; Lauterbach 2017), or their attempts to secure access to land (Alava and Shroff forthcoming; Baroin 1996).

Secondly, the case studies I present show that the opposition Gifford introduces by positing churches as sites of procuring access to power and resources, rather than as sites of accessing the divine, is misleading. While Gifford acknowledges that Africans may also find ‘profound spiritual resources’ (ibid.) within mainline Christian churches, his division between the divine and the material is utterly foreign to much African religious thought, wherein access to material blessings is a central reason for relating to the divine (Ellis and ter Haar 2004; Lauterbach 2017; Magesa 2002; Mbiti 1990). Rather than being in opposition, ‘the divine’ intersects with the ‘the mess’ that arises from the fact that churches’ are crosscut by, and embedded in, relationships through which power and resources are distributed.

This intersection is evident also in cases of ‘confusion in the church’, and in the ways in which ‘confusion’ was conceptualised and dealt with by my informants. Rather than merely uncovering the ‘mess’ in the churches, the chapter thus looks at how the entanglement of churches in the relations through which power and resources are distributed appeared to my informants, most of whom were close to the churches, yet very few of whom had access to their inner circles. By seeking to understand what confusion was and how people dealt with it, this chapter thus provides a glimpse into how mainline Christians in Kitgum have sought to (re)orient themselves and their communities after the end of war.

It does so through three cases: two from the Protestant Church in Kitgum, and one from the Catholic Church. The first case, which details a miserable day experienced by the choir of the Protestant Town Parish, provides a snapshot of a recent moment of confusion, which, as the second case shows, relates to over a decade of conflict between the so-called ‘Concerned Christians’ and the leadership of the Church of Uganda’s Kitgum Diocese. While the first two cases provide insight into what was meant by ‘confusion in the church’, the third case, about inexplicable sickness and healing in a devoted and wealthy Catholic family, directs attention to explanations of, and engagement with, particular kinds of confusions in Acholi in the space between social status, witchcraft, and God.

A pilgrimage turned sour

In February 2015 the field beside the small parish church in Mucwini, some twenty kilometres from Kitgum town, was to serve as the scene of the yearly commemoration of the death of a son of the village, Saint Janani Luwum, after whom the Protestant Town Parish in Kitgum had been named. Luwum, who had been the Archbishop of the Metropolitan Province of Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, and Boga (Zaire), died while under arrest in Idi Amin’s cells in 1977, after publically reprimanding Amin for arbitrary state violence. Today, Luwum’s likeness is captured in a statue in
Westminster Abbey, among other martyrs of the 20th century. In 2015, the day of his death was for the first time to be celebrated as an international day of commemoration. Choirs, traditional musicians, and dance groups were to travel from Gulu and Kampala to join local Acholi choirs, their performances augmented by that of a South African opera singer. Pilgrims were scheduled to arrive at the site from neighbouring countries, with the service to be presided over by the Uganda-born Bishop of York, Ssentamu, who in 2013 had been a runner-up when the global Anglican Communion selected a new Archbishop of Canterbury. Even the president would come.

Hence it was no surprise that as soon as the director of the Town Parish choir, David, heard I would be in Kitgum in February, he demanded that I come to Mucwini as part of my old choir. Since November the previous year, the choir had gathered five times a week to practice a list of songs given to them by the organizing committee. In January, a new list had been sent, replacing all but one of the songs on the first list, so the choirs had been working extra hard to learn the new material. When I joined them just over a week before the big day–my skills in reading sol-fa notation prima vista stretched to the limit–the excitement caused by the coming momentous event was tangible. The choir, which had fallen to disarray after many of its members left the church due to an inter-church conflict (see below) and had started practicing together again only during my 2012-2013 fieldwork, dedicated hours upon hours in evenings and the weekend preceding the event itself to practicing the twenty plus songs that were to be in tip-top shape at the commemoration. Traditional Anglican hymns in English and Acholi, the Ugandan national anthem, the (little-known and rarely sung) Acholi anthem, and Händel’s Hallelujah chorus, were all committed to memory. The Town Parish choir would join a busload of choristers from Gulu to travel to Mucwini the day before the event, and there practice the program with choirs from Kampala. Relaxed socialisation would also take place at the school at which the choirs’ accommodation would be arranged.

That was the plan. Reality was to prove different.

The day before the event in Mucwini, Kitgum Mission was handed over by the Comboni missionaries to the local diocese – a significant event for my Catholic informants, and the reason I had arranged to be in Kitgum at this particular time (see Chapter Six). Knowing the event would stretch out well into the evening, I had to opt out of travelling to Mucwini with the choir. Together with my fellow-altos Sofia and her small baby, we arranged a ride to Mucwini with a group of women living near the Catholic Mission, and arrived at the scene a few hours before the service was to start, only to encounter a number of disgruntled singers. No transportation had been arranged for the choir, and organising transportation for everyone had taken much of their previous day. No preparations had been made for their accommodation, and it had been well past midnight before it had finally become clear that there was not going to be any joint practice, since the choir from Kampala and even from Gulu
would not make it to the location until the following morning. David, the choirmaster, was refused a copy of the order of proceedings for the service, and once he eventually managed to track one down, he learned that almost all the songs the Town Parish choir had rehearsed had been struck off the program. Our fellow singers had thus woken up annoyed, tired, and hungry. And it was only going to get worse.

When Sofia and I arrived, tents were still being pitched on the edges of a large open space facing the small hill on which Janani Luwum’s grave sat alongside the local church. In front of the grave a covered wooden podium and altar had been raised. No separate choir tents had yet been set up near the altar, so our group of some thirty singers headed for the tents nearest the altar, on the opposite side of the field to the yellow NRM tent in which the president’s entourage would be seated. As we carried over piles of chairs and tried to settle into something resembling choir formation, a middle-aged woman clad in a dress of glossy fabric and flashy cut, a striking headdress, and oversized sunglasses, complained loudly that the front rows were for ‘my girls’, a group of young dancers from Kampala. The choristers tried to explain that the choir should be sitting together in formation, but the ‘the woman from Kampala’ (as my choir friends later referred to her) simply frowned and refused to budge. My friends exchanged annoyed looks, indicating to each other with rolls of the eyes and silent mutters that the woman was too full of herself. The impression was strengthened when we realised that she spoke Acholi, yet chose to speak only English, even to those members of the choir who could only respond to her in Acholi.

In the meantime, David was going back and forth negotiating with the other choirmasters and the event coordinators and appearing increasingly annoyed. Eventually we were told to gather in formation in the shade of some large trees on the slope between the president’s tent and the altar. We did as we were told, the women annoyed that they had to sit on the dusty roots of trees since no chairs could be balanced on the spots we were allocated. As soon as we sat down, however, a man who said he was responsible for security came over and yelled that there was no way we could sit there since the president would have to pass right by us on his way to pay his respects at Luwum’s grave. ‘Where should we sit then?’ the choristers asked, to which the security official barked that it was not his problem, and then accused the choir of being terrorists. A number of us went to try and talk nicely to the agitated man; the choir had practiced hard and wanted to make this a special day for the special visitors, so could he please think of a way for us to do what we had come to do. Next we knew, a place for the choir was allocated in front of the stage, but a message was passed around that only those with robes would be allowed into the choir formation. One after the other of our choir members shouted out in annoyance that we were just as uniformed as the Kampala and Gulu choirs in their long robes; our choir members had robes at home but had been advised to take black and white so that everyone would be wearing the same.
Amidst all this mess, confirmation rippled through the choir members drifting around wondering where to sit that no tent would be set up in the place indicated. It was the height of the dry season, and sitting in the sun for the many hours the service would inevitably take, with temperatures in the shade reaching 35 Celsius, would be tough. At this point about half of our members opted to forget the miserable choir and, rather, found seats in the shade, while the other half obstinately found places behind and on the side of the big choir now formed by the out-of-towners in their gowns. A few found chairs, but most of the men and a few of us women simply sat on the ground on our choir folders. With all the confusion, no time remained for practice, and practically none of the choir members had a copy of the order of events, for which reason most of us had no idea what would be happening. Eventually the president arrived, and once he and other notables had paid their respects at the grave of Luwum, the service started. At one point a group of youth from Kampala were given the microphones, and struck up praise songs in Swahili or English, which no-one in the Kitgum choir had heard before, and which I could not see a single member of the audience joining. As national TV filmed the joint choir, the Kitgum choristers alternatively looked sour and stayed mute, or looked around sheepishly, trying first to pretend we knew the songs and eventually catching on. We joined the Kampala choir when they reached out to hold our hands and wrap their arms on each other’s shoulders during a song praising God and Christian unity, but from the looks on my friends’ faces, it seemed I was not the only one finding it hard to put my heart into it.

Bishop Ssentamu’s inspirational sermon on justice and the righteousness of Luwum, given in perfect British English, was rife with examples from life in the United Kingdom and intricate philosophical and theological metaphors. I was fairly busy taking notes, but it was clear his words had little resonance with the members of the choir sitting around me: people looked bored. Expressions were livelier during the performance of the skilful South African soprano – a classic opera aria in Italian, to the accompaniment of a playback symphony orchestra – during which the young men sitting near me first looked around incredulously and eventually cackled with glee. The opera singer also performed Handel’s Hallelujah Chorus – alone – although the choir had spent hours, as advised, learning to sing it for the event.

By the time the service eventually reached an end, the choir members from Kitgum had all made their way into the shade of the nearby trees, now without hindrance from security officials. As the cang i wibye began – this time with a line-up of purely pro-government speakers (in comparison to the political confrontations I witnessed at the 2012 state burial, see Chapter Six) – choristers chatted quietly while passing around water bottles and little snacks, all of us trying to rehydrate after many hours in the blazing sun. The audience on the far sides of the field erupted in ululations once the president announced that he would donate thirty million shillings (about 1,000 euros) to the local parish, that a statue of Janani Luwum would be erected in Kampala,
and that February 16th would henceforth be a national holiday. My choir friends were slightly less enthusiastic, the man next to me wondering which budget would be footing the president’s contribution. With everyone’s spirits already dampened by the ‘Kampala lady’, the condescending visiting choirs, and the dry season’s sun, Museveni’s speech, which I described in Chapter Seven, seemed almost appropriate. Only minutes before he announced his contributions, Museveni had admonished the Acholi for their low integration into the monetized economy. In northern Uganda, he explained, ‘You have too many loneno, spectators. You need to have more lotuko – players.’

The distribution of food was set up in a way that made it clear that only dignitaries were really expected to stay to enjoy it, despite prior promises of food for all. Once the speeches were over and the president had left, a deflated choir thus made ready to travel home. Sofia and the baby and I were relieved to enjoy a ride with the mixed group of Catholic and Protestant women we had travelled with in the morning, who spent their trip engaged in a lively discussion about whether Anglican saints were really saints. Some of our choir friends managed to hitch rides on trucks, but by the time the three women choir members who had not found a place had walked the twelve kilometres home to Kitgum, it was abundantly clear that for the Town Parish choir, this was a pilgrimage gone sour.

The day after the event, the choir gathered at the normal time for what was supposed to be practice. Very few of us came, and since the nearby stadium was blaring music for a Charismatic crusade starting the same day, we were unable to sing; those gathered concentrated mainly on dispiritedly venting their displeasure at the previous day’s events. A few weeks later David formalised the choir’s annoyance into a nine-page report submitted to the event’s central organizing committee. The report begins by establishing the importance of choirs and music in the Anglican tradition:

Since music is what nurses souls, and only what can bring any person or group of persons closer to God before mentioning any word of prayer, choristers and all who have loves on and believes in music, treat choirs with all the respects and dignity they deserve.

After alternating sections of dry factual account and spirited theological argumentation, the report concludes with a list of recommendations, some purely technical, such as that local choirmasters should be involved in the National Organizing Committee and not just people based in Kampala, others flavoured with a touch of acidity:

With the fact that musicians are intellectual enough to sing any language even that of birds, we therefore recommend that if there is need to sing any song in any language in such a function, give it to the choirs early enough and tune to listen. (Acellam 2015, 8)
Some of the choir members I spoke with attributed the chaos to the president’s presence. The security official’s accusation that the choir members were terrorists, and the way in which the choir’s positioning was determined on the basis of presidential security, certainly underlined how political considerations impinged on liturgical ones at this event – as at all other public church events (see Chapter Six). David, however, directly countered this interpretation in the report he wrote on behalf of the choir to the National Organizing Committee, in which he stated that ‘no any excuse should be on the coming of the president as far as the confusions are concerned because the president could not stop the committee from allocating a tent for all the choirs’ (Acellam 2015, 8).

The most painstakingly elaborated argument in David’s report, however, is that the event failed to be properly Anglican – notably, he used the official denominational label ‘Anglican’, rather than the term Protestant more typical in lay speech in Uganda. As he made clear in the report, David (a former keen member of the Concerned Christians; see the following case study) was all for ecumenical engagement, but he argued – as many ecumenists do – that proper relations between different denominations could not add up to slippiness: to engage with others, one must first clearly articulate and embrace one’s own tradition. Hence, David’s report argues that singing Catholic hymns at the service without having managed to secure a Catholic choir to join the others, and singing non-Anglican praise songs, undermined a key objective of the event: ‘The celebration of the life of St. Janani Luwum should strengthen our faith as Anglican and to believe in our doctrine since it is the only doctrine that saved the entire country from Idi Amin Dada and his regime.’ In David’s analysis, the way the event was arranged indicated not only the National Organising Committee’s loose commitment to Anglican doctrine, but to non-material values in general:

It was observed and realized that even elites in our society do value only hardware materials, and because music is [an] unseen and untouched subject that can only be heard when performed, the choirs were unvalued in this function and left out. This is a very unfortunate situation especially for development of the memorial and if continued, then we are going to sell away St. Janani Luwum and the memorial to those with worldly wealth. But remember, Janani Luwum did not die for the rich, because majority of them had flown to seek asylum in other countries living [sic] behind the poor as preys to the monster. (Acellam 2015, 7)

David’s argument that Janani Luwum had not undergone martyrdom ‘for the rich’, but for the ‘poor’ who had been left as ‘preys to the monster’, was strikingly similar to that made by the bishop at the commemoration of the Catholic martyrs in Paimol (see Chapter Three). Luwum, like the catechists in Paimol, was a martyr for the ordinary people, those without material wealth, those struggling – like the majority of the members of the Kitgum Town Parish choir – to simply make a living. In this
rendering, Luwum had given his life for those without the comfort of the oversized sunglasses of the ‘woman from Kampala’. And although it was not spelled out in David’s report, in discussions it was clear that for Protestant Acholis, Luwum was a son of their soil, more so than of Uganda. This only added to the insult that the National Organizing Committee had bypassed the choir in peripheral Kitgum when planning an event that was arranged to celebrate the patron saint of the town’s very own church.

It appears to me justified to read David’s report, and many of the comments of the choir members with whom I discussed the event, in part as attempts to grapple with a sense of humiliation, and as responses to shaming. For members of the Town Parish choir, and for choirmaster David, being in the choir was a serious affair: they gave a lot of their time to practicing, not only to improve themselves as singers but, as some of my informants explained, because being in the choir helped them be better people (see Alava 2017a). Their participation in an ecumenical choral event a year prior to Luwum’s commemoration, where they had met with choirs from various churches and from all over the Uganda, socialised, shared, and sung together with all these other Christians, had been hugely meaningful for them. The original plans for how music would be conducted at Janani Luwum’s commemoration had also been made among the choirmasters there: plans that the sudden death of the joint choir project’s coordinator, and the take-over of all the planning by the National Organising Committee, had humiliatingly brought to nothing.

Although this was not directly articulated in David’s report, nor by any of my friends in the choir, their demeanours and the sum of tiny comments and choices of wording, in resonance with numerous discussions I had had over preceding months of fieldwork, made it clear to me that the way in which the event was handled by ‘the people from Kampala’ struck a sensitive nerve. A disorganised planning committee, an ungowned choir, a security official’s accusations of terrorism, and rejection by an Acholi woman so consumed by her new cosmopolitan and English-speaking existence in Kampala that she treated her own people with condescension, resonated with historical inter-group resentments, and threatened to shame entire groups of people: the Eastern Acholi from Kitgum in the eyes of the Western Acholi from the Diocese of Gulu, and all of the Acholi in the eyes of the rest of Uganda. Museveni’s speech about insufficient lotuko in the region seemed merely to articulate an accusation implicit in the event in its entirety.

Few of the people I met had developed a distanced, analytical edge to this theme of humiliation, although the few who had saw it as a problem that desperately required addressing, whether through the revival of clan structures or traditional dances and other cultural events. What was more common was for a resistance to shaming to be expressed more inchoately, yet be allowed to seep through: in the sarcasm of David’s comments about the ability of choristers to sing even in the language of birds, and in the defiant faith in God’s justness as exemplified by some of the Town Parish singers.
One of these was Sofia, who had a baby to care for during the service and, therefore, did not sit with the choir in the sun. She was also among those who seemed the least vexed by the events. When I asked her what she thought of it all, she simply stated that God would bring them down, ‘the woman from Kampala, and her kind’. Sofia, in the manner of most active Protestants I knew, often made biblical references in her speech, and likely drew on Luke 1:46-55, where Jesus’ mother Mary praises God: ‘He has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty.’ In this vein, Sofia believed that in the end the powerful and the mighty who looked down upon others and treated them disrespectfully, would topple. In a similar tone, David’s report ends in the solid faith that after some rectifications, the Janani Luwum memorials ‘are going to be amazing’. It was this conviction, and an orientation towards the future, that helped David, Sofia, and the rest of the choir to overcome their disappointment and persevere in their mission to serve the church with their song: the same conviction that had motivated the choir members to begin practicing together again in the shade of the Town Parish during my 2012-2013 fieldwork, after years of intra-church conflict that had shaken the whole diocese (detailed below).

**Peacemakers and troublemakers**

The moment at which the choir seemed at their most jubilant in Mucwini was when the Archbishop of the Church of Uganda, Stanley Ntagali, was introduced as the caretaker of Kitgum Diocese. This confirmed the good news received a few days previously, when the archbishop had arrived in Kitgum with an entourage of archdiocesan administrators to settle - once and for all it was said - the dispute between the bishop and the Concerned Christians of the Kitgum Diocese. The bishop, Rt. Rev. Benjamin Ojwang, had been consecrated in 2001 following the retirement of Rt. Rev. Macleod Baker Ochola. Ochola had been the first bishop of Kitgum Diocese, which was divided from the Gulu-based Diocese of Northern Uganda only in 1995. He had gained both local and international recognition for his role as one of the founders of the Acholi Religious Leader’s Peace Initiative, through which he had also forged a close friendship with Catholic Archbishop Odama. Ochola’s home village was within Kitgum district, and throughout his retirement he remained continued was a charismatic speaker who is widely respected in Kitgum and beyond.

In 2004 a group of members of the synod of the Church of Uganda Diocese of Kitgum presented a memorandum for discussion at the meeting of the Diocesan synod, which levelled a number of accusations at Bishop Ojwang: first, unconstitutional administration, namely, a lack of transparency in the use of funds and unfair recruitment policies; and second, the abuse of ecclesiastical office, by which
reference was made to the bishop’s claimed ‘non-Anglican’ activities. Complaints regarding his administration had simmered since the bishop’s consecration in 2001, but it was the second batch of accusations that finally provoked members of Kitgum Diocese to take action. These were sparked by events that took place a few months prior to the writing of the memorandum, events which many of my Protestant informants still recounted with much animation almost ten years later. In May 2004, Ojwang and members of his household were abducted by Lord’s Resistance Army rebels, but escaped through the intervention of government soldiers after only four hours of captivity. Sometime after Ojwang’s release, pastors from a local Pentecostal church approached Ojwang and told him there were bad spirits in All Saints Church, the church at the diocesan headquarters, and that Ojwang would die if the church were not cleansed. A prayer session was held, during which the bishop followed the pastors in walking around the church seven times.

At the synod meeting in December of that same year, Ojwang explained that he had been confused following the abduction, and asked the synod for forgiveness for what had transpired at All Saints Church, and for having appointed a young Catholic woman, who had been close friends with Ojwang’s family since she became saved during secondary school, to a delegation from Kitgum that toured England as guests of the Church of England (J. Taylor 2005). The bishop denied, however, all accusations of financial and administrative mismanagement. After many hours of debate during the synod, the house of the clergy recommended that the bishop be forgiven, while the house of the laity, unsatisfied with the bishop’s explanations, demanded further action. The synod eventually resolved to invite Archbishop Orombi to come to Kitgum to pray for Ojwang and to ‘radiate All Saints Church to God’.

In a letter dated October 7th 2005, almost ten months after the synod meeting in which the invitation had been mooted, Archbishop Orombi responded to the request by acknowledging the concern of Christians in Kitgum, admitting that the prayer in question had indeed been un-Protestant. However, Orombi emphasised that Bishop Ojwang was ordained by God, and that Christians must submit to his authority. He therefore recommended that a ‘prayer of support for the bishop and the Diocese’ be arranged, culminating in Ojwang’s leading Christians around the cathedral singing ‘Onward Christian Soldiers’. The archbishop argued that such an action would be ‘a challenge against Satan who is trying to tear the church of Christ in the Diocese’.

The Church was, however, already torn. By May 2006, a group calling themselves the Concerned Christians (hereafter CC) had been formalized by those dissatisfied with Ojwang. A stand-off ensued when the CC refused the invitation by the diocesan

59 My account of the dispute in Kitgum Diocese draws on minutes, letters, petitions, and reports written by various parties to the dispute, of which I have copies. The documents cover the period from 2004 to 2008, whereas events after 2008 have been reconstructed on the basis of interviews and informal discussions with people on all sides of the debate.
secretary to a ‘reconciliation and thanksgiving prayer’. In place of a reconciliation prayer, the CC demanded that a cleansing prayer be held, claiming that it could only be arranged should the bishop ‘denounce his divisive and dictatorial administration’ of the diocese. In letters written by the CC to various Church of Uganda authorities over the following years, as well as in interviews I conducted both with former members of the CC and other Protestants – many of whom agreed with the CC’s arguments by the time of my fieldwork in 2012-2013 and even more so by 2015 – concerns about the bishop’s conduct as a Christian and a Protestant converge with concerns over his capabilities as an institutional administrator. At the core of the latter was disquiet over Ojwang’s preferential treatment of one half of the diocese (Pader) over the other (Kitgum) and his failure to follow good administrative procedure.

According to the CC, the bishop completely ignored all CoU regulations regarding personnel management, demoting pastors from Kitgum and appointing unqualified pastors from Pader to high positions, allocating study scholarships only to students from Pader, and bullying diocesan staff from Kitgum to resign so as to replace them with staff from Pader. A particularly weighty accusation concerned the bishop’s dealings with international faith-based NGOs, which were numerous in Kitgum at the time, and with the diocese’s overseas church partners. The international focus on northern Uganda in the first decade of this century facilitated foreign contact for the bishop and his chosen companions to a far higher degree than during the deepening national and international isolation of Kitgum Diocese during my 2012-2013 fieldwork. During the first three years of his ordination, as the bishop himself told the 2004 synod, Ojwang had travelled to USA, Malawi, Nigeria, the UK, Spain, and Taiwan. The CC accused the bishop of dealing with the foreign NGOs and churches personally rather than through official channels, and of grabbing benefits for himself and for his home district rather than spreading them equally between parishes in both of the districts belonging to the diocese (since then, the districts have been further split).

At some parishes, including the Town Parish within Kitgum town, parish councils resolved to deny the bishop access to the altar in order to ‘safeguard Protestant doctrine’. Over a thousand Christians signed a letter to the leaders of the Church of Uganda, in which they formally denounced Ojwang as bishop, while pledging continued loyalty to the CoU. The CC also advised archdeacons and parishes to keep their funds in their own accounts and not transfer them to the diocesan account as per CoU regulations.

As the years passed, the dispute became increasingly bitter, and advanced to new registers. When the bishop tried to officiate at a service in Town Parish without invitation, he was locked into the vestry, an incident which led to the arrest of a number of church members by plainclothes policemen whom the CC later claimed had been planted in the church by the bishop. Despite all manner of mediation
attempts by notable politicians, religious leaders, bishops from other districts, and the CoU archbishop, the dispute dragged on, and court cases were instigated both against the bishop and by the bishop. The CC also formally accused the bishop of having consulted witchdoctors, and of having cast a curse on the diocesan accountant resulting in the death of the accountant’s son. During my fieldwork, elaborate rumours still circulated of the bishop housing large snakes that were suspected of being assistants of the Devil, while those loyal to the bishop claimed that the grave illness and eventual death of one of the CC’s key leaders was a punishment from God.

Almost everyone with whom I discussed the topic agreed that part of the intractableness of the dispute related to the bishop’s edgy personality and poor social skills – something even his close supporters acknowledged. But what is blatantly clear from all the material and interviews I gathered on the topic was that for those near the centre of the scuffle, on both sides of the battle line, the wrangle was over money and power. Both Protestants who were loyal to the bishop, and those who thought that the CC and the bishop should drop the nonsense, emphasized that the ordination of Ojwang, following Ochola, had been a severe blow to a core group of diocese administrators and clergy close to Ochola. Many also claimed that at stake was a political battle, with Ochola an avowed supporter of the UPC, and Ojwang allegedly a member of the NRM. Rumours were also recounted that the bishop’s abduction had been machinated, either by Ojwang to garner sympathy from his disloyal flock, or by someone who wanted to get him killed.

Regardless of the extent to which these speculations contain any truth, it is clear that those nearest the scuffle in the diocese – those with most at stake with regards who held the keys to the diocesan office, managed the diocesan accounts, and set the terms of reference signed with international partners – were those already comparably well-off by local standards. This is a point to which no heed is paid in any of the documents drafted by the CC that I have read, or in the majority of the interviews I have held with those close to the race for the bishop’s throne. This point was, however, certainly not lost on the majority of the Protestants in Kitgum, or on all members of the synod. Minutes from their meeting in 2004 read: ‘The support given to the Bishop from outside should be spread to benefit the whole Diocese especially to the camps and Night Commuter Centers.’ The money used to construct a nice guest house at the diocese, or to facilitate workshops for clergy from Pader, was taken from not only the Kitgum clergy, but also from Protestants living in the frightful, inhumane surroundings of wartime Kitgum. One of the worst of these, and incidentally the first displacement camp I visited while doing master’s-level fieldwork in Kitgum in 2006 (an experience that shook me deeply, see Chapter Five), was just a stone’s throw away from the diocesan headquarters.

Eventually, in 2014, Ojwang was convinced by the house of bishops that he should retire, and farewell services were arranged; but just months later, a group of his supporters convinced him to sue the CoU for unlawful forced retirement. In early
2015 a high court judge advised the parties to sort the issue out among themselves, and finally, late in 2015, a caretaker bishop was appointed to oversee the diocese until a proper election could be arranged. Not long after, a group of notable Protestants, led by the first bishop of the diocese, the renowned former chair of the Acholi Religious Leader’s Peace Initiative, Bishop Ochola, went to the archbishop and to national media with a request that the caretaker be replaced by another. At the time of writing, Bishop Ojwang has left the bishop’s house in Kitgum and moved to his home village, but the issues surrounding diocesan leadership in Kitgum are still not resolved. There have been demands that the diocese be split between Kitgum and Pader, but sceptics have noted that with church resources extremely limited as they are, duplicating diocesan administration would not serve Christians, but only those lucky few who landed jobs in the new diocese.⁶⁰

How then did all this appear to my informants in Kitgum? Opinions differed wildly, but one of the most concise indications of the depth of annoyance all this squabbling has caused was made by my assistant Monica, who transcribed one of the interviews I conducted with a key figure in the CC (with his knowledge). Monica attended Town Parish regularly on Sunday mornings, but was not further involved in church activities. She was deeply annoyed by the interviewees’ words. In bold italics, she filled the transcript with her personal commentary, assessing the truthfulness of the elder’s claims, imploring me to realize that the man was lying, wishing God would descend to set things straight, and raging at the elder’s failure to acknowledge the importance of money to the CC’s cause. She writes:

I think these people they used to enjoy money from the church, and when Ojwang came the money they did not get, and that is why they are bothered! In any case why don’t you come and pray just like other people who just come to pray not get anything from the church!

All of the people I interviewed, whether supporters of Ojwang, or of the previous incumbent, Bishop Ochola, or of the CC, readily accepted that the clergy, including the bishop, gained resources from the church with which to send their children to school and live in relative - albeit for most of the Protestant priests, extremely modest - comfort. As Porter has argued, moral authority in Acholiland is deeply embedded in individuals:

Someone from within the moral community is accountable for his or her leadership. If a particular local leader in a village is seen as unfair they are marginalized or replaced. If they are particularly powerful and people are unable to displace them, they will circumvent and avoid his authority ... In the villages

⁶⁰ Demands for new dioceses in many parts of the Church of Uganda parallels the creation of small and economically unviable districts, which many scholars have argued has multiplied opportunities for patronage, and allowed the state to assert its presence at a local level while whittling down the possibilities of anti-NRM political mobilisation (Green 2010; Nsamba 2013; Sjögren 2013).
where I work, the community’s trust in the individuals involved plays a greater role in their effectiveness and credibility than the office they hold. (Porter 2013, 113)

Based on my research, it appears this is also the case with the clergy. And in the context of churches, which after all are sources of tangible or at least potential material benefits, the fact that authority is embedded in individuals rather than in institutions is also of immense relevance for understanding church politics, or ‘confusion in the church’. For priests and reverends to be regarded as entitled to material benefits, they had to be seen as having sufficient moral authority. In the context of churches, this meant good relations with members of the church, a perceived willingness to share the plate, proficiency in spiritual inspiration, consolation, and healing, sufficient doctrinal purity, and divine anointing. Once these were lost – as they were for Bishop Ojwang in the eyes of the CC, and as they were for the clergy collaborating with the CC in the eyes of those supporting Ojwang – the money and power that came with the office was seen as being up for grabs, to be apportioned to a more worthy or properly anointed servant of God, and to the innermost circle of his loyal flock.

As Gifford (2015) argues, and as the case of the Church of Uganda in Kitgum also clearly shows, activity in the church may provide a core group with access to donor resources, and the salaries, houses, land titles, or scholarships this may accord (see also Lauterbach 2017). But for most Protestants in Kitgum, joining the choir or attending Sunday services offers no promise of access to privilege. Some may be motivated by the slim chance that this could change if they persevere in their commitment to the Church, but for the majority this is not the case. Whereas Gifford (2015) opposes so-called material motivations to participate in church activities with the motivation to access the divine, the two cases presented so far have indicated an intersection of ‘the divine’ and of ‘the mess’ engendered by the fact that churches are embedded in the networks which divide and apportion power and resources in society. Money and politics do not determine peoples’ attempts to gain access to the ‘divine’ or the outcomes of these attempts; neither are cosmological and spiritual imaginaries incapable of influencing the material realities in which churches and Christians exist (Ellis and ter Haar 2004). The third case I present highlights this point even further, and allows me to elaborate a view of how anyobanyoba manifested itself in Kitgum, what the churches had to do with it, and how their members engaged, and came to terms, with it.

Churches, classes, curses and dealing with confusion

The family of one my key informants, Ladit (uncle or sir – a term of respect) Opira, a well-educated and successful Catholic elder living in the vicinity of the Catholic Mission, went through some serious and awe-inspiring experiences during my fieldwork. Ladit Opira’s twenty-five-year-old daughter, who had a respected job on the
government payroll, had recently fallen critically and mysteriously ill. She had eventually been rushed to Mulago, the main government hospital in Kampala, where doctors were unable to discover what was causing parts of her body to malfunction. The doctors warned the family that since they could find no cause for their daughter’s suffering, nor discover anything that would improve her condition, she was slowly but surely nearing her death. A nurse at the Catholic hospital in Kitgum heard of the family’s predicament, and suggested they contact a Catholic healer she had heard of in Kampala.

According to Ladit Opira, his daughter had been hard-working and diligent, as a result of which she was promoted fairly soon after she entered her new job. She was also provided with a good apartment on the premises of the institution where she was employed, one superior to those of many of her former equals. The Catholic healer had visited the woman at Mulago, prayed over her in what Ladit Opira described as classic Catholic style and, shortly after, her condition had started improving. When I heard the story, the daughter was staying with her parents in Kitgum, still very weak but slowly recuperating from her sickness, for which a medical explanation had still to be discovered. According to Ladit Opira, the Mulago doctors considered her recovery a miracle.

After a short break from fieldwork, I returned to Kitgum and again visited them. The daughter’s condition had improved enough for her to return to her job in another town, but, before she left, a thanksgiving service had been arranged at their house, presided over by one of the Comboni missionaries. The healer from Kampala had been present, but had requested that he not be publicly pointed out, and had slipped out before the service was over. Ladit Opira’s daughter had asked the man to come and pray in her apartment before she entered it again, but the healer had prayed over some water, advising her to sprinkle it around the home and there would be nothing to fear.

There was much in the account that followed patterns typical to stories of witchcraft and malicious medicines in Acholiland (Behrend 1995, 26–28). In this as in many other stories I heard, medicines bringing about otherwise unexplainable sickness were placed in the home of someone of whom the perpetrator was envious, so as to cause their downfall. In this case, Ladit Opira’s family believed it was the young woman’s rapid rise in the ranks of her job that triggered the envy of her colleagues, and led them, or one of them, to resort to witchcraft. These accounts, where witchcraft is attributed to envy, and witchcraft idioms are evoked to explain inequalities in social and economic standing and well-being, are commonplace in the established anthropological literature on the theme (see, e.g., Comaroff and Comaroff 1993; Geschiere and Roitman 1997, 69 & 141–43). As Allen (2015) shows in the Acholi context, this is particularly common in cases where an individual is seen to rise in social standing in an unexpected way, as was the case for Ladit Opira’s young and only recently graduated daughter. In Acholi, the witchcraft idiom functions in both
directions: those who were seen as unjustifiably successful were blamed by others for using witchcraft, while those who suffered an accident or fell sick, blamed identifiable or unidentifiable others for causing their downfall by dubious means.

The case of Ladit Opira’s daughter also resonates with trends identified in research on Christian Charismatic healing. The rise of Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity in Africa is in part credited to the inability of mainline churches to deal with the problem of evil, and seriously to engage the spirit world in which many Africans regardless of their stated creed believe (Kalu 2008; Meyer 1994). As in many other contexts (see Behrend 2011; Lindhardt 2012; Omenyo 2003; Wilkens 2011), Kitgum mainline churches were also increasingly addressing these issues. At the Protestant Town Parish, Sunday services did not exhibit charismatic features, but faith healing and exorcism were practiced at praise meetings and gatherings in parishioners’ homes – practices which could also draw on the Balokole heritage of the CoU in Kitgum (see Chapter Nine). The impact of the charismatic movement, while notable in many Catholic parishes in Acholiland, was far less evident at the Catholic Mission, largely because of the lack of enthusiasm of the resident Comboni priests. Here, only a handful of charismatics gathered weekly for praise meetings, and the case of Opira’s daughter stood out as the solitary incident of charismatic healing that I encountered. The Catholic healer’s unwillingness to draw attention to himself, and his use of ‘by-the-book Catholic’, as opposed to notably ‘Charismatic’ healing practices, are also typical of Catholic charismatics who wish to stay in the folds of the Church and avoid confrontation with Church leadership.

If it is read alongside the previous two cases from the Protestant Church, the story of Opira’s daughter tells us something about the role the churches play in their members’ attempts to deal with confusion. From my position in the field, and from my understanding of what my informants told me, the Catholic and the Protestant Churches have a double role in relation to confusion. On the one hand, churches as institutions were seen as deeply implicated in the politics of confusion: the resource and power game, which raised some while lowering others, was played out within local churches as much as in any social location, and churches were also active in the bigger game played out on a societal and national level. On the other hand, churches, as sites of narrative imagination, provided their members with multiple resources and tools with which to conceptualise, make sense of, come to terms with, and seek to alter confusion.

Three tools stand out in particular: prayer, forgiveness, and trust in God’s justness. Prayers included both those for healing which addressed sickness, as with Ladit Opira’s daughter, and the very different kind of ‘power prayer’ (described below), which was used by the Archbishop of the Church of Uganda to influence Protestants in Kitgum to bend to his directives. Forgiveness helped individuals to come to terms with the pain they had experienced at the hands of others, and enabled communities to come together despite dispute and conflict, as had happened in Town Parish after
the CC dispute, and as embodied in the ARLPI. As Whyte, Meinert and Obika show, in post-war Northern Uganda, forgiveness, which is highly tinted by Christianity, is ‘celebrated as the ability to go on living together, in civility if not in true amity’ (2015, 57). Finally, trust in a just God allowed those who encountered situations in which their wrong-doers showed no remorse, not necessarily to forgive, but to avoid getting trapped in their anger, and rather to shrug: there’s nothing we can do about it, but God will bring them down. This attitude served one well whether dealing with an obnoxious woman from Kampala, the abrasive disrespect of a presidential security official, an endlessly misbehaving yet seemingly unconquerable bishop, or a president who seemed to have purposefully punished and humiliated the Acholi for close to three decades.

Mess in the church?

‘This is Henni Alava. She’s studying all the mess in the churches.’ I could not help but laugh at the words with which my friend introduced me to his fellow priest, who had just returned to Gulu after studies abroad. Feeling slightly embarrassed, I gently rebuked my friend: ‘Come on, that’s not what I study!’ By the time I had explained that what currently interested me was how churches influenced the way people thought about politics, both priests had ceased listening and were busy getting on with what they had been doing when our paths crossed.

The brief encounter with the two Catholic priests, four months into my fieldwork, opened my eyes to how my research must have appeared to the priests with whom, by then, I had spent a considerable amount of time. It made me see that the topics that interested me the most - the discords, tensions, and conflicts of the churches I studied - were perceived as mess: disorderly, unpleasant, even disconcerting. This mess and confusion, whether brought about by politics or witchcraft or a combination of both, appeared incompatible with the vision of the church as a utopic realm of peace. As people often explained to me, before all this had entered the scene, there had been harmonious, respectful coexistence.

The argument emerging from this and previous chapters is that confusion, not only in the church but more broadly in Acholi society, could be used as a catch-all concept to allude to misfortunes, injustices, and obstacles encountered in the course of life. As such, confusion was attributed to things that happened out of sight, behind the scenes. And what resided in the darkness was politics and witchcraft, both of which were seen as capable of actively and purposefully creating confusion. In contrast, what in the Catholic and Protestant understanding resided in the light, and could bring light, break through, heal, or set right confusion, was God. Such an image of darkness and light, or confusion and clarity, is of course a roughly simplifying schematisation, yet it resonates through the cases I have presented.

As I argued in Chapter Eight, conditions of anyobanyoba were the context from which utopian visions of peace, harmony, unity, and godly intervention arose, and
from which they gained their force. But incidents of confusion in the church were also those where the publicly proclaimed Utopia of Peace in mainline Christianity (see Chapter Eight) encountered its seemingly unsurpassable boundaries. The Utopia of Peace could not resolve the tensions in society, or provoke into being a whole new world, because it was professed by an institution crosscut by boundaries of ethnicity and class, one beholden to material properties: in short, an institution steeped in and itself constantly reconstituting relations of power. This power was one wielded by some over others and had continuously to be renegotiated in order for the question of ‘who owns and decides what, and how is the right to own and decide distributed,’ to be answered, time and again. While the Utopia of Peace occasionally questioned certain aspects of how power and resources were shared within churches within Uganda, and in the world, it did not suggest how things should be done differently; hence it prompted unity among contestants only when the price of disunity was sufficiently high.

We thus encounter very different uses of utopian narratives of peace and unity in different settings. In the case of the Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative, resources in the religious traditions of the groups involved, and in Acholi custom, were drawn upon to create an inspirational narrative that drew people together across previously existing boundaries, to work for the end of armed violence in the region. Similarly, members of the Town Parish choir saw singing together as a service to the church recovering from bitter divisions within its pews. In fact it was their love for the choir that brought a number of former Concerned Christians back to build community with others at the church. On the other hand, the narrative of peace and unity appears in very different guise in the conflict over resources and power in the Church of Uganda. Here, it was most prominently utilised to disparage one’s opponents, and to deal with disunity that brought ridicule to the church. In the top echelons of diocesan politics, the narrative of peaceful coexistence was used in an attempt to secure order and reign people in – albeit as I have shown, with very limited success and even divisive impact.

Two days prior to the choir’s fateful pilgrimage to Janani Luwum’s grave, I sat with jubilant choir members listening to a spirited speech given by Archbishop Ntagali to an enthusiastic crowd of Christians gathered at the Diocesan headquarters in Kitgum. ‘Blessed are the peacemakers!’ the archbishop declared. After that, in a prayer, he bound, in the name of the Lord, all those enemies of the Church who were bringing confusion and division to Kitgum Diocese, and who took the church to worldly courts. ‘For God is the only judge!’ Ntagali shouted. In response, the crowd yelled, ‘Amen,’ and people raised one or both of their arms high in the air, while Bishop Ojwang, whose legal assistant had recently filed a case against the Archbishop in the high court in Kitgum, sat with closed eyes and hands held modestly in his lap, and lifted one finger.
After many prayers and announcements and praise songs, the master of ceremonies concluded the gathering with a re-capitulation. In case someone had not understood, he explained, the message of the day was that the peacemakers are blessed, and then continued:

Think now of the opposite. If you are not blessed, you are cursed. And if you are not a peacemaker, you are what? A troublemaker. The troublemakers cannot be children of God. They are then what? Children of the Devil. Let me hear you say it, children of the what?

And the audience shouted in unison: ‘THE DEVIL’!

As so many times before, in the Protestant Church as in less elaborate and publicized conflicts in the Catholic Church, calls for unity and words of purported peace become weapons to augment increasingly entrenched division and conflict.

Words in themselves, whether of peace or of war, count only for so much, and should never be analysed as separate from their embeddedness in the relationships of those by and amidst whom they are spoken. However inspiring a utopian narrative may be, its impact always unfolds amid the confines and possibilities accorded by the political economy – the division of power and resources – of human relations. In the dispute at the Protestant Church in Kitgum, it appears as if these confines led the unifying Utopia of peace to become entirely undone: rather than generating unity
among people of different faiths in Kitgum in the face of the violence perpetrated by the army and rebels alike, the Protestant Church failed to find unity even within itself. And the repercussions continued to trickle out: during Ojwang’s time the events that had brought together Catholics and Protestants in Kitgum during the peak years of ARLPI activism in the town – joint Christmas carols and a joint Way of the Cross on Good Friday – were again arranged separately.

Yet the cases of the Acholi Religious Leader’s Peace Initiative and of the choir at the Town Parish, the latter uniting former disputants in an attempt to bring life back to a divided parish, and the former uniting ex-disputants in an attempt to bring life back to war-torn Acholiland, tell a different story. They show how a utopia may unfold with profound impact when sufficient numbers of people endorse its promise as worth striving for despite the disabling strictures that render its success unlikely.
Chapter 10

Navigating confusion, hope and complexity

In 2015, in the midst of rumours of violence escalating in the shadows at the approach of the 2016 elections, my friend Orom, in response to my sigh about things not looking good, uttered the words with which I opened this thesis. In place of anger at a government for which he had little respect, in place of forced hopefulness, and instead of agitation for further expressions of frustration or worry from me, Orom cleared his throat and said:

In life it is so that some people want to create conflict and violence. Some people want everyone to just live in peace. Some people want to create chaos. And it is up to us to decide which path we want to follow.

As soon as the words had been uttered, I felt they captured the essence of my study. They epitomised what I, drawing on Susan Whyte (2002, 2005), have referred to as the subjunctive mood, which conditions the pragmatic choices made between alternative paths. In postwar Acholiland, some of those paths appear ridden with, and productive of, confusion, and others embedded in a hope of peace. But as this thesis has shown, and as I argue my informants in Kitgum knew, it really was not this simple: because it was hard to know what was going on; because there was so much in the shadows that was never spoken about; because anyobanyoba tye, one could never be quite sure where the path that one followed would take. Voting for the government might entrench structural inequalities and buffer the power of an unfriendly state, but it might also keep Acholiland at peace, however palpably fragile. Voting for the opposition might bring about change, or war. Supporting one bishop over another might lead to conflict at the church subsiding, or it might entrench disputes that had simmered for years. But despite the uncertainties that lingered, the choices had to be made.

This thesis set out to study how community is imagined in post-war Northern Uganda. Originally, the question arose from my curiosity and desire to understand how that which had been broken by war could be remade; how the Acholi among themselves, and Uganda as a nation, could navigate the difficult process of seeing themselves as members of a community, rather than as ‘we(s)’ and despised or dangerous ‘others’. My initial interest was to understand how churches, which particularly in the form of the ARLPI appeared in popular accounts as harbingers of peace and unity, had contributed and were contributing to this process of imagining community. As it turned out, the churches themselves were torn by divisions: the imaginaries of community that were evoked by and in them were deeply embedded in contestations over resources and power, and inadvertently created inclusion at the expense of enforcing exclusion.
The task of re-imagining community - what I have referred to as the crafting of political imaginaries, and as narrating politics - is one that cuts across churches, societies, nations, indeed, humankind as a whole, as do the difficulties and ambivalences characteristic of this task. While the task is truly universal, its manifestations are particular: political imaginaries both reflect and redefine the cultural, material, religious, and cosmological lifeworlds of the communities in which they are woven.

Achieving an ethnographic understanding of the rather abstract notion of ‘reimagining community’ necessitated working with more concrete aims, which for me were to analyse the intertwining and entanglements of churches and politics, and the ways in which mainline churches were influencing post-war Acholi society. Choices made in the everyday of fieldwork were guided by even more specific questions, such as: How much impact, and what kind of impact, do churches have in contemporary Kitgum? Did churches contribute to triggering or worsening war? Have they contributed to building peace? What is the relationship between the churches and the state, and between churches and political parties? As the preceding chapters show, many of the issues that emerged as relevant during fieldwork led some of the chapters in this study to be formulated around a very different set of questions. Furthermore, what has become clear to me over the past four years, and what hopefully has been shown by this study, is that both the questions that I posed during fieldwork, and the ones that have emerged during analysis, refuse brief black-and-white answers. Research about complex social realities does not bend into simplified headlines, although it is precisely such simplifications that gain traction during war and in reports that percolate out from sites of war. During the Northern Ugandan war, stories in Uganda concerning this study’s topics were simplified into propagandist one-liners - ‘The church supports the rebels!’ claimed the government; and ‘The church collaborates with the government!’ claimed the rebels - whereas stories that crossed the international news threshold told of heroic missionaries who risked their life in the service of Acholi citizens and, as the ARLPI’s activities gained momentum, of churches as the forerunners of peace building.

This thesis is an effort to nuance such simplistic accounts. It suggests that each one-line argument about the role of mainline churches in Northern Uganda needs to be qualified with nuanced analysis of the complexities of the social, political, cosmological, theological, and cultural dynamics involved. As I have argued, no unidimensional explanation suffices - understanding the role of mainline churches in Northern Ugandan society requires multidimensional analysis. Thus the study’s main argument - that churches, as cosmologically, politically, socially, and materially embedded institutions and communities and as sites of, and producing resources for, narrative imagination, have influenced the process of reimagining community in the aftermath of war - has been purposefully phrased so as to provoke the follow-up question: how so? In the following, I recount the key points of my answer to this
question as it unfolds over the eight chapters of this thesis, after which I close with
reflections on some aspects of hope, ‘the good’, suffering, and imagination that were
raised in Chapter Two.

**Key arguments rephrased**

Chapter Two presented the theoretical orientations that have guided this study. In
searching for an approach that extends beyond state-centric conceptualisations of
politics, I suggested employing concepts from narrative studies as well as political
theology to the analysis of ethnographic data. In reflecting on recent debates on the
anthropology of ‘the good’ and of suffering, I argued for the particular necessity of
scrutinising the ontological presuppositions that guide and may be reinforced through
research in sites of mass violence.

Chapter Three provided an overview of the history of colonialism and the
missionary work of the (Catholic) Verona Missionaries and the (Anglican) Church
Missionary Society, arguing that understanding the ways in which churches influence
contemporary Acholi society and political imagination necessitates analysis of the
historic processes leading to the churches’ embeddedness in contemporary Acholi
society. Three aspects of embeddedness were emphasised. First, ‘cosmological
embeddedness’ referred to the ways in which Christianity in Acholiland was
influenced by pre-missionary beliefs and practices, and how notions of Acholi custom
were transformed through the missionary encounter. Second, ‘political
embeddedness’ drew attention to the ways in which political structures and political
thought in contemporary Uganda and Acholiland have been influenced by the
relationships established between missionaries, chiefs, and the colonial state during
and after the colonial era. Thirdly, the notion of ‘social and material embeddedness’
highlighted the continuing traces of a century of missionary work in the material and
social landscape in contemporary Kitgum. Noting the near-complete absence of a
postcolonial critique of Christian mission among Catholics and Protestants in
Kitgum, the chapter argued that the embeddedness of churches has largely been
naturalised, in part through the silencing of, and the amnesia surrounding, the
cosmological and political violence of the colonial-missionary enterprise.

In Chapter Four, I outlined the evolution of church-state relations in Uganda’s
political history. Through the provision of education, Protestant and Catholic
missions laid the groundwork for what was to become a denominationally divided
educated elite in Uganda. At the eve of independence, this division, and both
churches’ staunch support for emerging church-related parties, resulted in the
emergence of a party political arena in which religion played a powerful role. Religion,
however, has never been the sole variable explaining societal processes in Acholiland
or in Uganda. Rather, religion has intertwined with questions of ethnicity, locality,
and political ideology in complex ways. The chapter showed that in recent decades,
due to the critical stance taken by President Museveni on religious divisionism and his
banning of parties in 1986, and the growth of Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity in Uganda, the direct links between particular parties and mainline churches have lessened in importance. What has also changed are regional political dynamics, since rather than the formerly significant North-South divide, Uganda today is increasingly divided between those who are seen to benefit from Museveni’s rule, and those who are not, leading to new sets of divisions that cross-cut ethnic and regional boundaries. Yet the chapter showed how amidst these shifting political dynamics, the patterns embedded in political imaginaries of the colonial and early postcolonial era continue to influence the contours of political thought and competition in Kitgum. Finally, the chapter analysed the complex positionalities of mainline churches during the Northern Ugandan war, and argued that the ability and willingness of churches to take active political stands in contemporary Uganda is limited both by the current regime’s pressure on religious institutions, and by the ethnic and political divides within churches themselves.

Chapter Five shifted tone, from a macro analysis of churches and politics, to tracing the ways in which memories of the war reverberated in everyday lives in Kitgum. In so doing, the chapter also outlined the epistemological, methodological, and ethical foundations that have guided this study. Reflecting on the striking absence of talk about the war that I encountered during my fieldwork, I highlighted how a critical engagement with dominant conceptualisations of ‘trauma’, and of speaking as the pathway to healing, has transformed my interpretations of post-war Acholiland. Awareness of the relationality of silence provoked reflection on the possibilities for, and limits to, endeavours to ensure ethical encounters in the field. Meanwhile, a focus on the ethics of representation produced questions about the tendency of research on post-war societies to focus on the darkest sides of social life, and on the cumulative effects of this on views held about war-affected communities, whether by outsiders or by the communities themselves. In response to these reflections, I argued for sensitivity towards, and respect for, the choice of informants to remain silent.

Chapter Six showed the importance of public church events as sites for the performance of statehood in contemporary Acholiland, and as arenas for political imagination. Through a detailed analysis of one moment of the politics of cung i wibye, literally ‘standing on an anthill’, I showed how these events reproduce Uganda as a violently ethnicised state in which power is embedded in gendered neopatrimonial relations. I argued, however, that when public space for political debate is as constricted as it is in contemporary Uganda, such events provide important arenas for speakers and audiences to debate political narratives underpinning the present, and to express hopes for transformation. This work of narrative imagination is, however, always embedded in and confined by relations of power.

Specifically, as Chapter Seven argued, the threat of violence that lingers beneath the anthills of public political performance creates the boundaries within and against which political imaginaries are narrated. Comparison between moments of cung i wibye
in 2012 and 2015 showed that the possibility both for open political contestation, and for imagining peace and unity, was considerably curtailed in preparation for the 2016 elections: by measures taken by the NRM state, but also by the self-disciplining of the Acholi public. I argued that the subdued stance of many Acholi towards the state is moulded both by genuine fears of renewed violence, and by webs of rumour and silence concerning violence in the past. Instead of the ludic ridicule of the state that Mbembe (ibid.) sees as characterising postcolonial subjectivities, I argued that the way in which many Acholi relate to the central state can be characterised as subjunctive (Whyte 2002, 2005), whereby political engagements are conditioned by pragmatic considerations made in light of simultaneously doubtful and hopeful expectations for the future.

In Chapter Eight, I suggested that in response to the *anyobanyoba* experienced in the aftermath of war, a field of individual and collective political imagination that centres around visions of peace has emerged among Acholi mainline churches. This field, which I refer to as a Utopia of Peace, is clearly visible at a public level, but can also be gleaned in private, everyday spaces. In individual lives, it has allowed its adherents to make sense of the painful past and to turn towards the future. In the public arena, where it is most notably evoked by the Acholi Religious Leaders’ Peace Initiative, the Utopia evokes a vision of harmonious and inclusive community in Acholiland and Uganda, and has facilitated the overcoming of divisions between religious communities, within individual churches, and more broadly in post-war society. However, I argue that while this vision of peace has transgressed violent boundaries of exclusion, in so far as it embodies Acholi notions of social harmony, it has also entrenched the structural violence of gerontocratic patriarchy (Alava 2017b; Porter 2016). Moreover, as I show through analysis of the parallels between this recent Utopia and the utopian visions of Acholi rebel movements in the 1980s, the work of crafting inclusion is never far from the violence of defining the boundaries of community.

The final analytical chapter elaborated how incidents of *anyobanyoba* in the church were those at which the publically proclaim Utopia of Peace found its unsurpassable limit. Through analysis of such incidents, I argued that the attempts of churches to transform society are always complexly entangled with the material, political, and social inequalities that characterise the churches themselves: the spiritual and the material are embedded in one another, both in confusion, and in the efforts to deal with it.

**Confusion, complexity, hope**

The things that appeared to influence how community and politics were thought of and practiced in Kitgum — formal religion, Acholi ‘customary’ cosmology, gender, class, party politics, ethnicity, and large and small-scale political economy — often appeared as such a jumble that they readily justified the sigh, ‘*Anyobanyoba tye*’. 

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Because the dynamics I was trying to understand resisted simple classificatory boxes, I have correspondingly avoided writing a firmly compartmentalised thesis. Rather, in an attempt to weave an image that does justice to complexity, I have allowed for key themes to alternately come into focus, and again retreat into the background.

In retrospect, it appears to me that in writing this thesis in this manner, I have replicated the pragmatic subjunctive mood I so often encountered in Kitgum: although I have rarely sensed that I see the ‘big picture’, and have not always seen how the pieces fit together, I have proceeded one page, one argument, and one snippet of empirical material at a time. The subjunctive mood, which I have claimed to characterise the way the Acholi relate to the state, and to confusion – a mood which looks towards an unknowable future with both hope and doubt – has also become engrained in me, and in the way I see not only Acholi lifeworlds, but life in general. The shape of this study has thus come to resemble what Page (2017) has recently referred to as vulnerable writing, through which uncertainty, confusion and hesitance can be laboured with in epistemologically, ethically and analytically productive ways.

In such a spirit, as I approach the closing of this study about the role of churches in Northern Uganda, I find it instructive to reflect on the original *Eutopia*, conjured in Thomas More’s (2001) imagination 500 years ago. More’s *Eutopia* was a fully egalitarian society, characterised by religious diversity and tolerance, whose citizens despised war and personal aggrandizement – and atheism. As much as More’s vision has instilled awe and inspired entire fields of research (Levitas 2013; Moylan and Baccelin 2007), it is sobering to remember how poorly More himself measured up to his vision. The successful and wealthy lawyer despised the first of the Reformation’s notable theologians, Martin Luther, and had Protestants tortured and put to death in an attempt to quench anti-Catholic sentiments in England. Eventually More was condemned to death by King Henry VIII as a result of his refusal to support Henry’s bid for the independence of what was to become the Anglican Church (and its notable coffers) from the authority of the Pope. As one journalist recently put it, More ‘died attempting to defend his sense of community’ (Cawthorne 2016), an attempt for which the Catholic Church venerated More as a Saint in 1935.

As distant as More’s story is in time and space from Kitgum, it strikes me as poignant that the churches I have studied, and the parishes of Saint Mary and Saint Janani Luwum, are descendants of the same 500-year-old schism that led to the demise of Saint Thomas More. Essentially, the story of the man who drew the outlines of *Eutopia*, and the story of how churches have contributed to the crafting of a Utopia of peace in the aftermath of war in Northern Uganda, reflect the same dynamics: on the one hand, they exemplify the human proclivity for imagining brighter futures, and on the other, bear witness to how these imaginaries are always embedded in the often violently contested relationships through which power and resources are divided. It is precisely this oscillation between the human desire for the good and the inevitability of violence and suffering in human reality that this study has reflected, meanwhile
striving – in response to calls for anthropologies of suffering (Das 2007; Venkatesan 2015) or of ‘the good’ (Robbins 2006, 2013) – for complementarity between the two. This stance finds resonance with the view expressed by Taussig:

[T]hat seems to me what human beings are about – that level of complexity, the ability to hold opposite ideas at once – and I think that is where I would really be most comfortable talking about hope – in a field where hope and lack of hope are organised into a sort of dynamic mix. (Taussig in Zournazi 2002, 47)

While Kleist and Jansen (2016) have distinguished between two broad bodies of scholarship on hope, ‘the replicatory’ and the ‘non-replicatory’, I have sought to show that this distinction creates an unnecessarily strict opposition between hope as an object of analysis, and commitment to a replication of hope as a scholarly disposition. Thus, my study has combined a critical analysis of hope – of its distribution and its transformation through time – with a normative commitment to balancing ontological presuppositions of suffering with those of the good.

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‘Why is it you go to church?’ I asked Sarah, and she responded, ‘Aah, it’s not something very big. I go there because that’s the only place that can give me peace’ (see Chapters Four and Seven). Rather than a radical alteration of reality – some kind of massive overhaul of the present political system, or the immediate coming of Christ – what most of the Catholic and Protestant men and women I came to know in Kirgum hoped for was a simple everyday peace. A contentment wherein the shadows of violence from the past, or whispers of violence in the present, did not interrupt daily life; a contentment resulting from being able to marry, take their children to school, see adult children thrive, live in peace with their neighbours, and find themselves employment. Amid the confusion, fear, and silence that I have argued characterises the post-war situation in Acholiland, and more generally the political climate in contemporary Uganda, it was this kind of everyday hope that enabled my fellow choristers to sing with conviction that ‘Things are getting better, things are getting better, things are getting better.’ Through the performative, repetitive acts (Butler 1997) of singing and praise, things already were better.

In a conversation recorded by Zournazi (2002, 44), Michael Taussig expressed the suspicion ‘that a lot of intellectual activity, at least in the twentieth-century Western cultural orbit, correlates lack of hope with being smart, or lack of hope with profoundity’. This study’s critical unpacking of the politics of silence, fear, and hope might easily have led me to brush off the conviction of my informants – that things were getting better, or that at least, they well might in the future – as unrealistic or naive. But such subjunctively hopeful moods emerged from lifeworlds profoundly more impacted by violence and suffering than mine – how then could I, from a position of relative privilege, possibly be dismissive of them?
It has been suggested that ethnographic studies of hope beg the question of whether it is the informants’ hope, or the ethnographer’s hope, that comes to be articulated in the final ethnographic text: ‘Though we place them insistently in the individual, neither desire nor hope can be removed from social engagement and implication. We are all, I suppose, caught’ (Cranziano 2004, 123). Certainly, as I have already discussed in the Chapter Two, my analysis of how community was imagined by and within the space of mainline Christianity bears the mark of my own scholarly, ethical, and political aspirations. I too am caught up in hope: not a fatalist certainty of a better tomorrow, but a subjunctive hope that remains hopeful despite the doubts that linger.

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There is an urgent need for scholarship that acknowledges complexity and steps away from uniform conceptualisations of communities influenced by war. Images that romanticise the ‘other’ – that seek to prove the benign character of religion, or narrate the Acholi as the perpetual victims – are just as dangerous as those that demonise by brushing off religion as a malignant force in society, or by vilifying the Acholi as responsible for all the suffering that has befallen their part of the country. Rather than providing clear-cut answers, the task of social science, in my view, is to ask questions that provoke acknowledgement of complexity and confusion – and in so doing unsettle the certainties of knowledge.

The subjunctive mood resonates with what Jensen characterises as the essence of postcritical social science: ‘it is based on a pragmatic and experimental engagement with each new situation as it arises’ (Jensen 2014, 361). For Jensen, postcritical social science lacks pre-set theories, methods or questions, political projects, or normative frameworks, which for him, establishes both its limits and its creative conditions, since neither theories nor methods can ‘provide more than provisional, experimental, and inherently uncertain grounds for research engagements and interventions’ (Jensen 2014, 361).

This study as a whole follows Jensen’s conviction that social science can only provide provisional and uncertain grounds, not only for research engagements and intervention as he asserts but also, I would claim, more generally, for action. But where I disagree with Jensen is his suggestion of the possibility – or desirability – of a postcritical social science evacuated of normativity or politics. As I argued in Chapter Two, and again in Chapter Eight, each social scientific, religious, or political interpretation of, and vision for, the world, is structured by underlying ontological underpinnings (Milbank 2006; Robbins 2006). And it matters what these underpinnings are: whether they are of violence and suffering, of goodness and hope. These underpinnings influence how data is read, and the way in which the world is reproduced in writing. I have advocated a position that oscillates between social
critique and the affirmation of hope - that untangles the suffering induced by the political economy of hope while declining to reject the affect of hopefulness, which, as Zournazi has written, ‘sustains life in the face of despair’.

As individuals, we are again and again tasked with the necessity of making what my friend Orom described as the choice between whether to follow the path of people who want everyone to just live in peace, or of those who want to create chaos. As scholars, our task is to ask questions that expose the complexity of those choices, and the ambiguity of what at first sight may appear clear options between paths of chaos and peace. In a world increasingly driven towards, and compelled by the creation of, oppositional extremes, adoption of such a scholarly disposition appears to me a normative, ethical, and political imperative.
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