



CRAID

Centre for Refugee and Asylum
Studies and Documentation

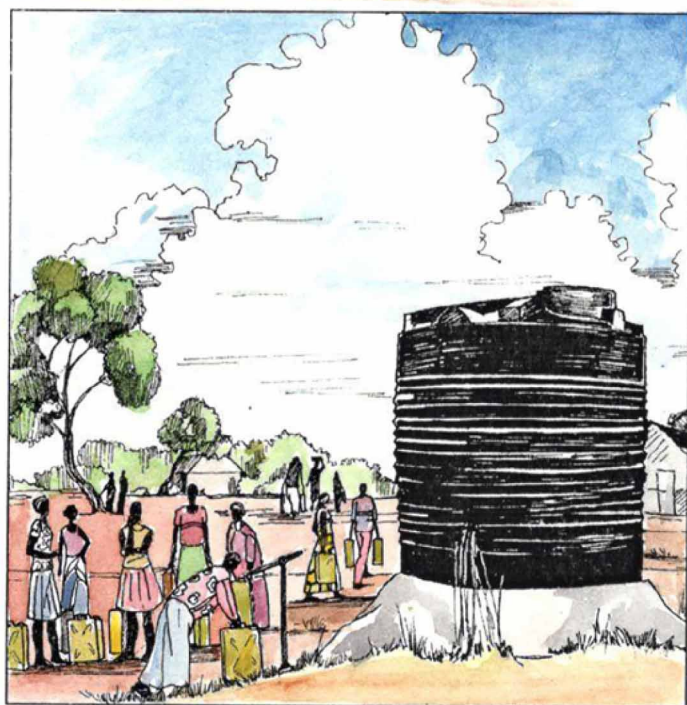


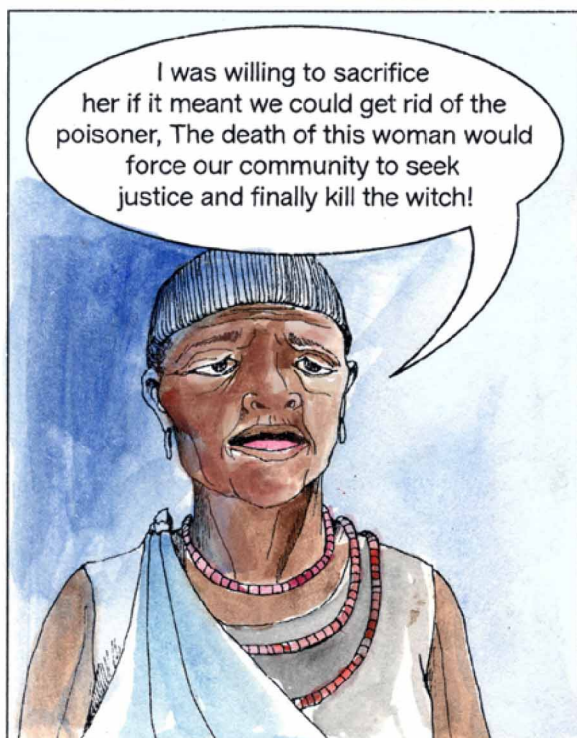
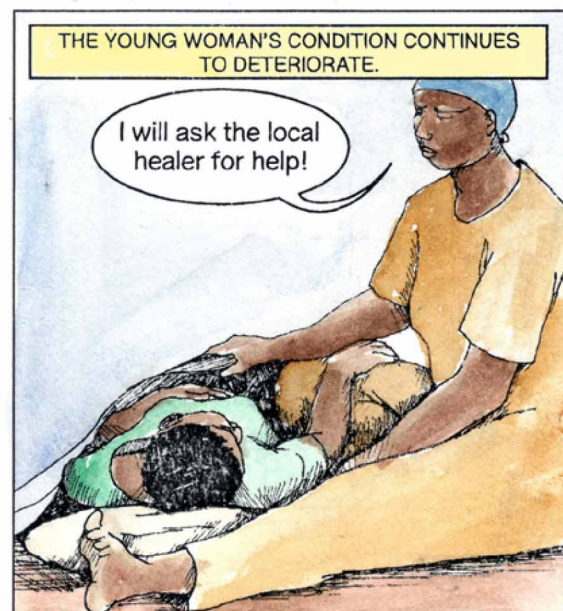
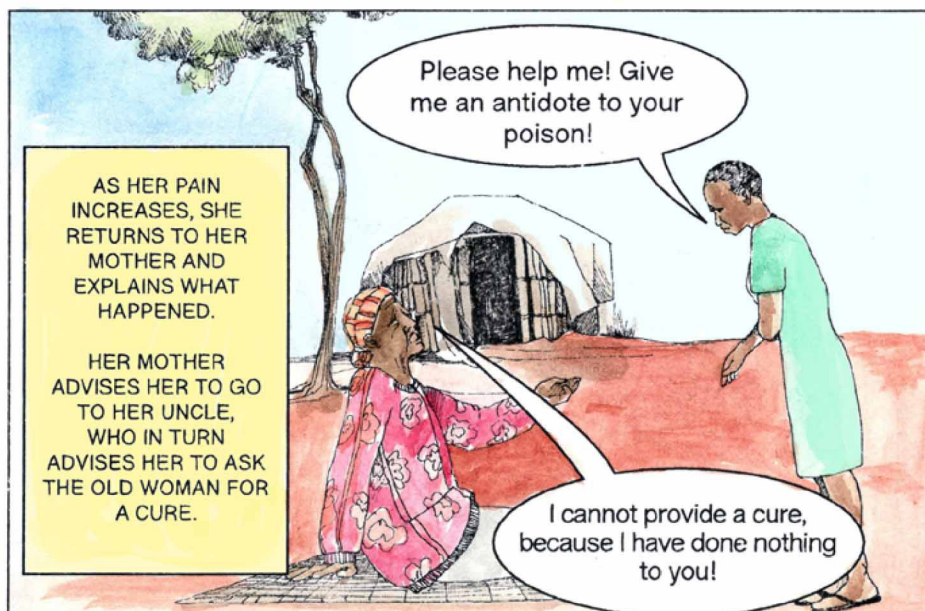
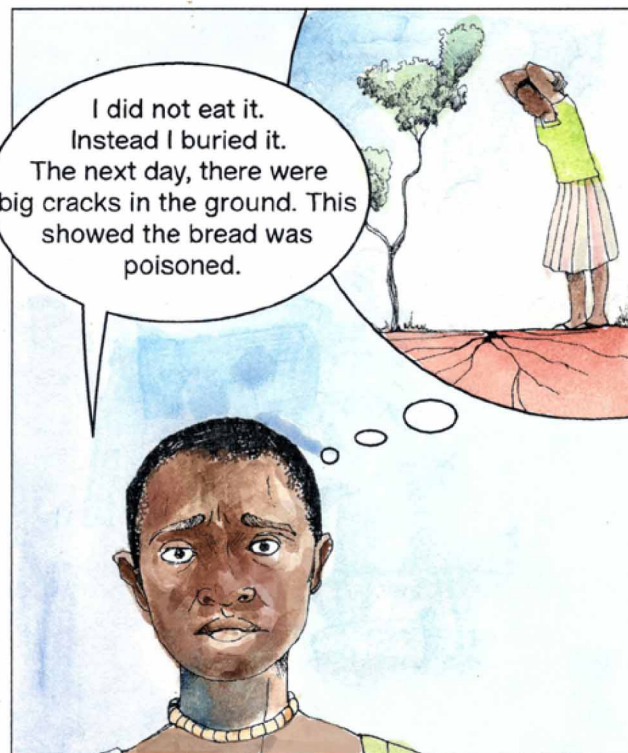
A POISONING IN PALABEK

THE FRAGILITY OF PUBLIC AUTHORITY IN PALABEK REFUGEE SETTLEMENT UGANDA

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Research: Dr Ryan Joseph O'Byrne

PALABEK REFUGEE SETTLEMENT IN 2017, HOME TO AROUND 30,000 SOUTH SUDANESE REFUGEES, MANY OF THEM ACHOLI.





THE WOMAN AND HER MOTHER CONTINUE TO SEEK HELP

Have you seen the block leader or the zone leader? We need their help!

No, but the block youth leader might be able to help. There he is now.

THEY TELL THE YOUTH LEADER THEIR STORY.

We will mobilize the youth and take action immediately!

What did you do to this young woman?

Poisoner!

Why did you do it?

Witch!

I did not do anything!

AAAH!

OK, I poisoned her! But she was not the intended victim!

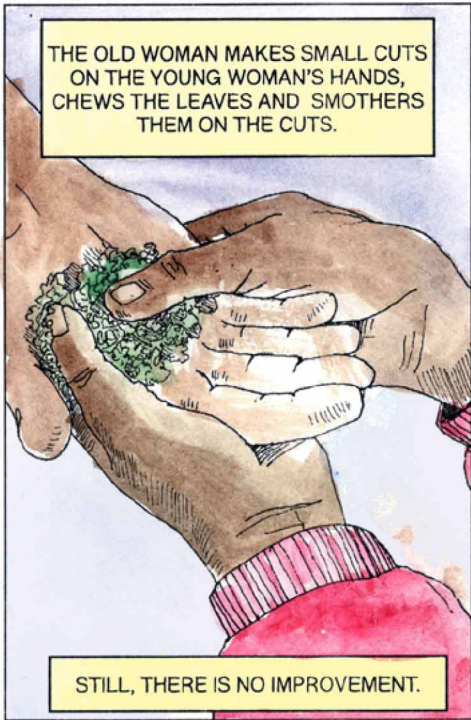
Show us the poison!

You must cure the victim!

Here take these. Leaves of lapena will make you better.

I knew the leaves would not make her better, but I needed to buy time. I was hoping for someone to come and save me!

THE OLD WOMAN MAKES SMALL CUTS ON THE YOUNG WOMAN'S HANDS, CHEWS THE LEAVES AND SMOTHERS THEM ON THE CUTS.



STILL, THERE IS NO IMPROVEMENT.

It's not working!
Give her something else!



THE YOUTHS GET IMPATIENT.

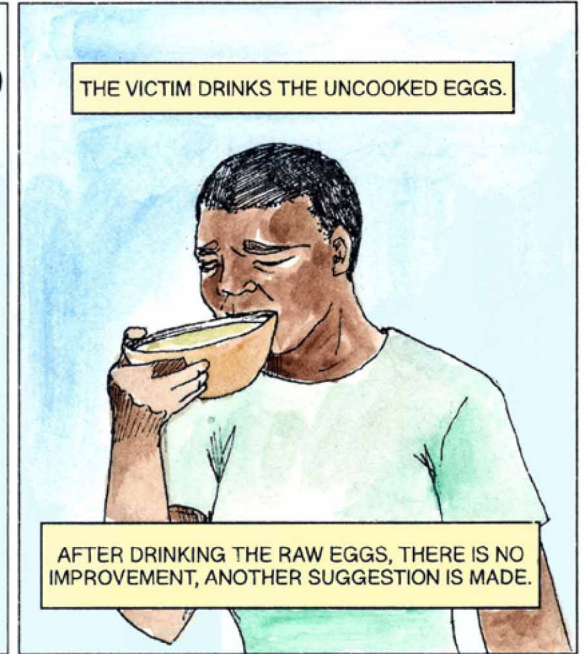
Give her some-
thing else!

We should give her
uncooked eggs and make
her vomit.

Give us money
to buy eggs!



THE VICTIM DRINKS THE UNCOOKED EGGS.



AFTER DRINKING THE RAW EGGS, THERE IS NO
IMPROVEMENT, ANOTHER SUGGESTION IS MADE.

She should drink the
witch's urine. That will make
her vomit out the poison!

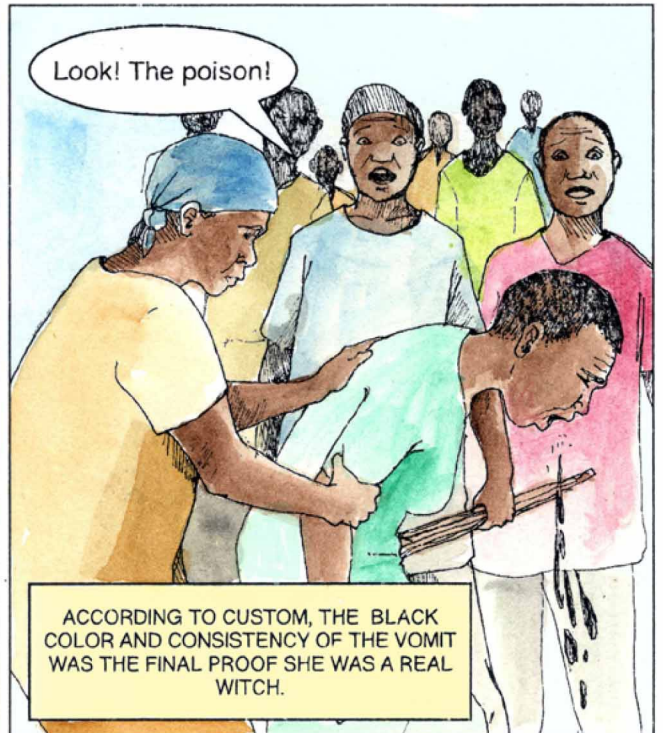


THEY FORCE THE OLD
WOMAN TO URINATE.



THE YOUNG WOMAN
DRINKS.

Look! The poison!



ACCORDING TO CUSTOM, THE BLACK
COLOR AND CONSISTENCY OF THE VOMIT
WAS THE FINAL PROOF SHE WAS A REAL
WITCH.

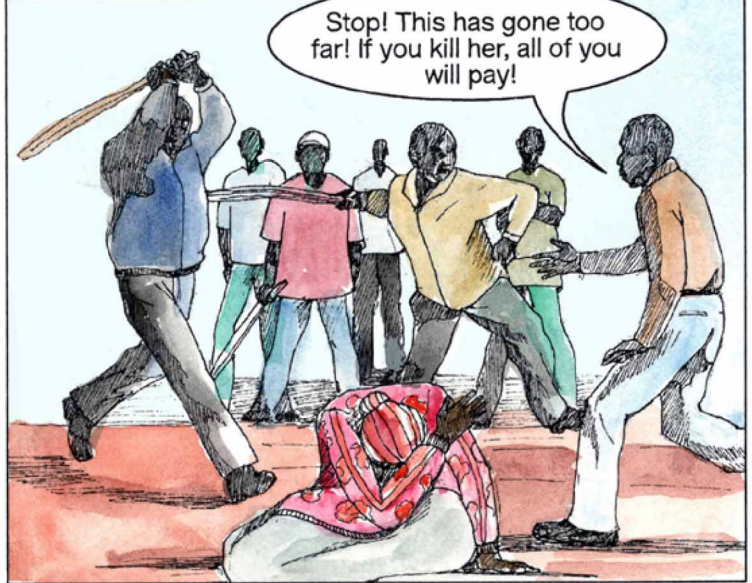
THE VIOLENCE CONTINUES, THE MOTHER TRIES TO INTERVENE, KNOWING IF THEY KILL THE OLD WOMAN THEN HER DAUGHTER MAY DIE AS WELL.

Please do not kill her!
I need her to treat my daughter!



THE YOUTH LEADER ALSO TRIES TO INTERVENE, HE KNEW IF THE OLD WOMAN DIED, HE WOULD BE HELD RESPONSIBLE BY THE AUTHORITIES.

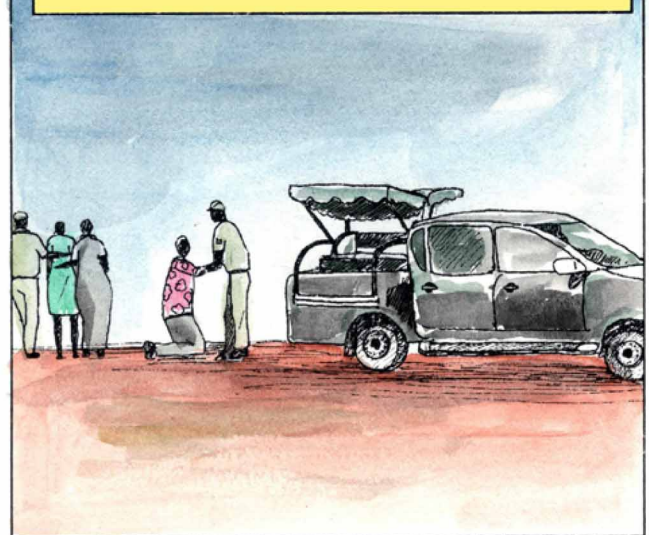
Stop! This has gone too far!
If you kill her, all of you will pay!



HE CALLS THE POLICE WHICH ARRIVES SOME TIME LATER.



THE OLD WOMAN IS TAKEN INTO PROTECTIVE CUSTODY BY THE POLICE. THE YOUNG WOMAN IS TAKEN TO THE HOSPITAL.



AT THE HOSPITAL

I am poisoned!
If you give me scientific medicine, I will die! This needs traditional treatment!

A witch's poison will react very badly to scientific medication!

Then why did you bring her here?



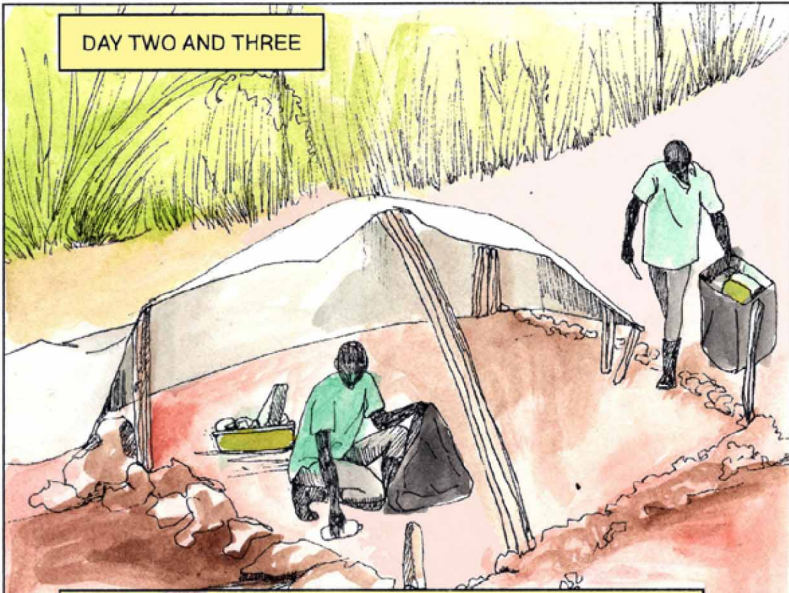
So you can test how much poison she has in her body!



The tests proved inconclusive. There was no scientific evidence that the woman had been poisoned, although we did see some localized swelling on her hand. We sent her and her family home.



DAY TWO AND THREE



THE NEXT MORNING, CAMP SECURITY OFFICERS COME AND COLLECT THE BELONGINGS OF THE OLD WOMAN THAT HAVE NOT BEEN STOLEN OR DESTROYED.

MEANWHILE, THE YOUNG WOMAN'S CONDITION DID NOT IMPROVE. THEY FOUND A UGANDAN TRADITIONAL HEALER LIVING NEARBY.



I will heal your daughter for 300,000UGX* **\$80

REFUGEE COMMUNITY LEADER IN PALABEK.

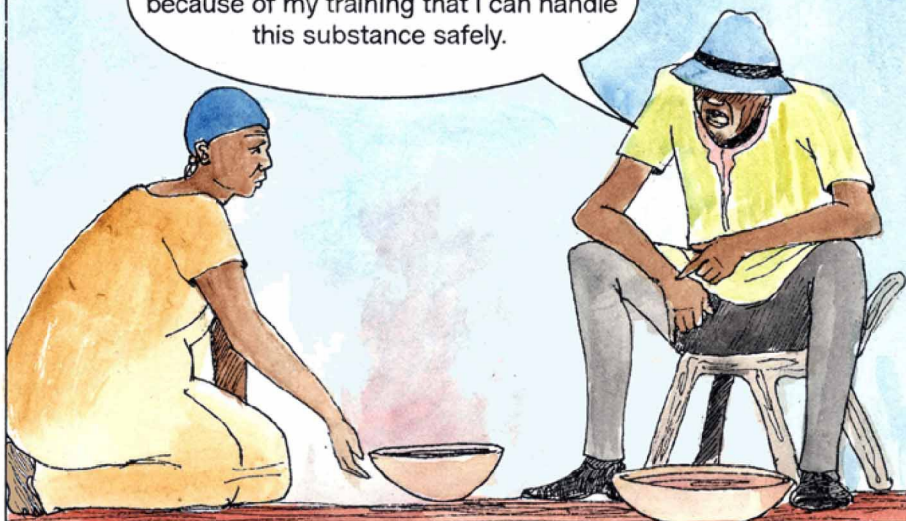
300,000UGX is a lot of money to a refugee. But because an NGO like AVSI was involved, the healer saw an opportunity to make a lot of money. He hoped they would help pay for the treatment.



OVER THE NEXT FEW DAYS, THE HEALER PROVIDED IMMEDIATE TREATMENT.



Don't touch that! It is highly toxic and dangerous. It is only because of my training that I can handle this substance safely.



AFTER A FEW DAYS, IT LOOKED AS IF THE WOMAN WOULD RECOVER.

The woman was poisoned with cobra poison. I could tell this because of the black vomit, the amount of swelling and because of the smell and taste of what I sucked from the wound.



AFTER TWO WEEKS THE WOMAN RECOVERED, ALTHOUGH SHE STILL HAS SOME SYMPTOMS OF PARALYSIS IN HER RIGHT ARM.

AFTER HER RECOVERY, THE WOMAN'S FAMILY ASKED THE OPM (OFFICE OF THE PRIME MINISTER) FOR MONEY TO PAY THE TRADITIONAL HEALER.

UNABLE TO RECOVER HIS PAYMENT, THE HEALER DECIDED TO SUE THE FAMILY.

When you were at the hospital, you refused medical treatment. So we will not provide any payment.

Who told you that refugees can go to Ugandan court?

Without payment, I refused to complete the treatment. This means the woman will never fully heal. Her arm will never have the proper feeling again.

THE OLD LADY REMAINED IN POLICE PROTECTION FOR THREE WEEKS.

I am innocent! Those men who accused and assaulted me just wanted my things.

Because I am a person with special needs I receive extra money from the UNHCR. The community calls me a witch out of jealousy.

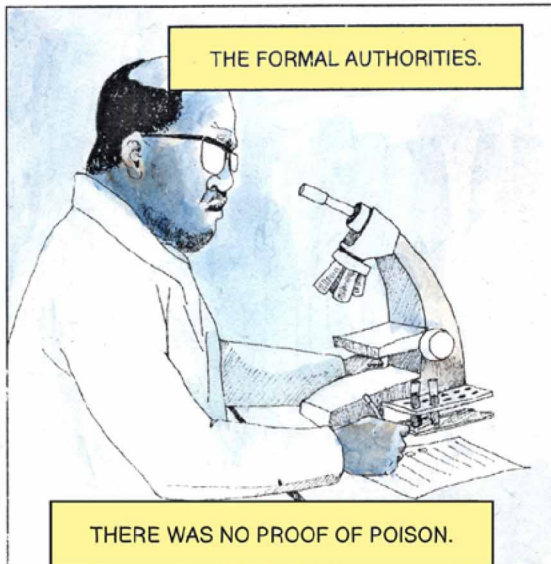
EVENTUALLY SHE WAS RELOCATED. THE OPM AND UNHCR (UNITED NATIONS HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES) ARE UNWILLING TO DISCLOSE HER NEW LOCATION, MUCH TO THE DISMAY OF THE COMMUNITY.

They care more about the well-being of the poisoner than they do about the safety of the community!

Next time, we will finish it ourselves!

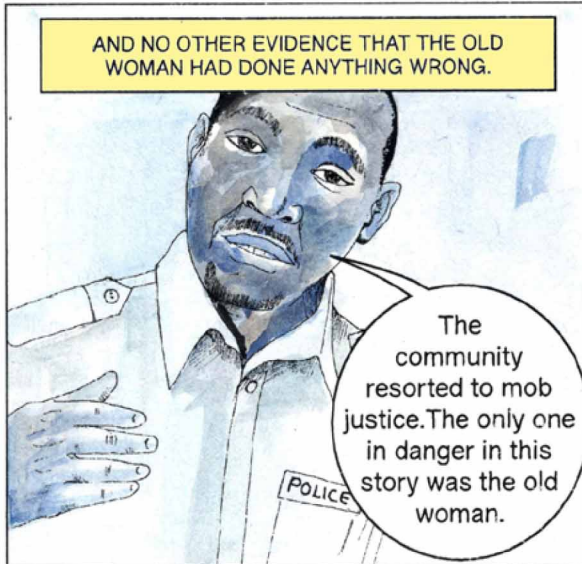
THE MOST STRIKING PART OF THIS STORY IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE COMMUNITY AND THE AUTHORITIES IN HOW THE EVENTS ARE INTERPRETED.

THE FORMAL AUTHORITIES.



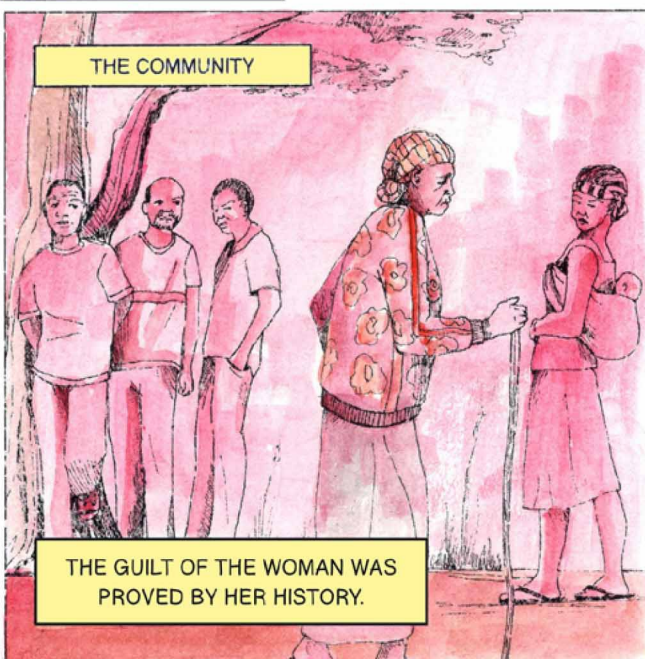
THERE WAS NO PROOF OF POISON.

AND NO OTHER EVIDENCE THAT THE OLD WOMAN HAD DONE ANYTHING WRONG.



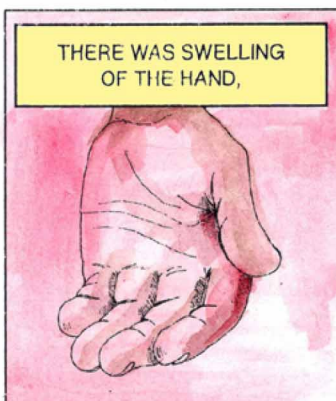
The community resorted to mob justice. The only one in danger in this story was the old woman.

THE COMMUNITY

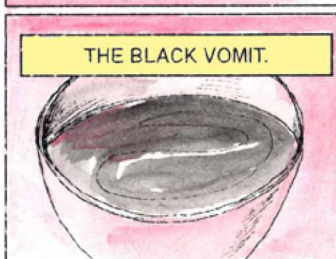


THE GUILT OF THE WOMAN WAS PROVED BY HER HISTORY.

THERE WAS SWELLING OF THE HAND,



THE BLACK VOMIT.



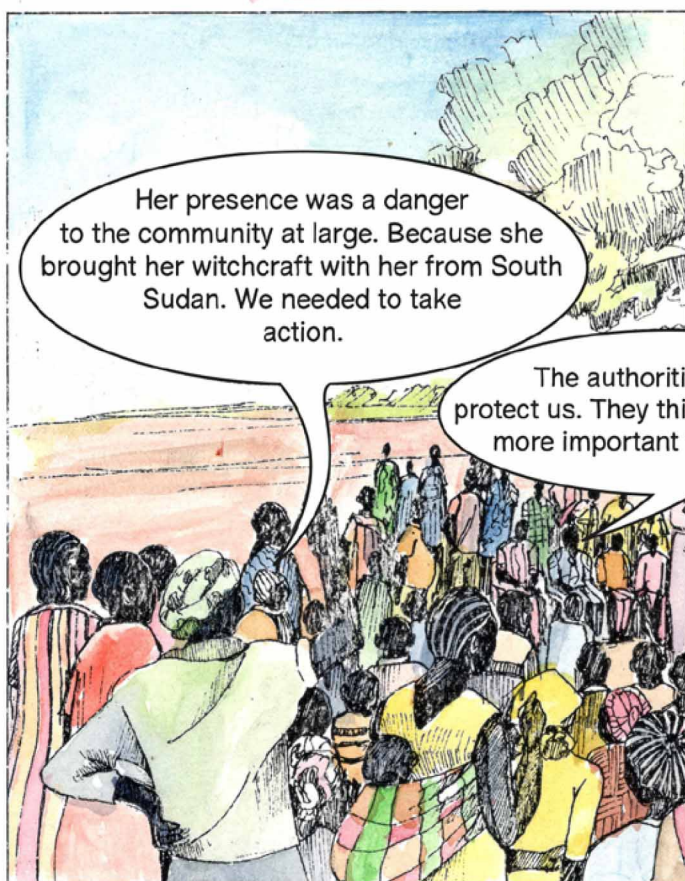
SHE CONFESSED.



OK, I did it!
I did it!

Her presence was a danger to the community at large. Because she brought her witchcraft with her from South Sudan. We needed to take action.

The authorities will not protect us. They think one person is more important than all of us.



Only we can protect ourselves!



END

Poisoning in Palabek - context

There are currently over 2 million South Sudanese refugees, most resulting from the 2013-2018 civil war. Despite now living in relative safety, most residents of Palabek Refugee Settlement in northern Uganda still experience great feelings of insecurity and uncertainty, uncertainties reflecting the complex difficulties of life without access to land, a steady source of food or income, or reliable health and educational support.

Unfortunately, these problems also make some refugees distrustful of others, especially members of other ethnic groups or those (like the elderly woman in this story) who are eligible for extra help or benefits. Many refugees also feel that NGOs and the UN privilege the rights of specific individuals over those of the community as a whole. They find the individual-oriented focus of the system especially worrying if the person being protected is believed to be engaged in harmful or anti-social activities such as theft or violence.

In such situations, feeling abandoned and neglected by camp authorities and without any legal way of ensuring their safety, camp residents sometimes feel they must rely on themselves for protection.

Such is the background for this story.