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Justice at the Margins: Witches, Poisoners, and Social Accountability in Northern Uganda

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Recent responses to people alleged to be ‘witches’ or ‘poisoners’ among the Madi of northern Uganda are compared with those of the 1980s. The extreme violence of past incidents is set in the context of contemporary upheavals and, in effect, encouragement from Catholic and governmental attitudes and initiatives. Mob justice has subsequently become less common. From 2006, a democratic system for dealing with suspects was introduced, whereby those receiving the highest number of votes are expelled from the neighborhood or punished in other ways. These developments are assessed with reference to trends in supporting ‘traditional’ approaches to social accountability and social healing as alternatives to more conventional measures. Caution is required. Locally acceptable hybrid systems may emerge, but when things turn nasty, it is usually the weak and vulnerable that suffer.

Keywords *Madi, Uganda, traditional justice, witch-cleansing, witchcraft*

In recent years, there has been a growing policy interest in what is often misleadingly termed ‘traditional’ justice, especially in parts of the world affected by armed conflict. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2007) suggests that 80% of people living in such places rely on nonstate actors, and the World Bank (2011:167) has suggested that supplementing formal justice with traditional community systems can be a ‘best-fit.’ These institutions, like many others, have become engaged in strategies to institutionalize local approaches to social accountability and social healing, in the expectation that they will be more acceptable to affected populations, and can be pulled in the direction of respect for equity and international norms.

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There is little evidence for such claims (Allen and Macdonald 2013; Huyse and Salter 2008; Kelsall 2009; Macdonald 2013), but even so, in places as diverse as Timor Leste, Sierra Leone, Rwanda, and Afghanistan, local mechanisms for reconciliation, compensation, and reintegration are considered to be more likely to achieve positive outcomes than the imposition of criminal prosecution and human rights laws (Alie 2008; Arriaza and Arriaza 2008; Cobban 2007; Hayner 2001; Latigo 2008; Shaw and Lars 2010).

In northern Uganda, the notion of ‘traditional’ justice has been embraced widely by activists and analysts, especially since the newly created International Criminal Court (ICC) intervened in an effort to deal with The Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) in 2004. The ICC is required by its statute to act ‘in the interests of justice’ and ‘in the interests of victims’ in a way that complements national processes. Those ideas are open to diverse interpretations, and they have necessitated consideration of alternative views. Local perspectives were initially drawn from among the Acholi, the ethnic group from which the LRA emerged, and which suffered most from the war. Influential figures, claiming to speak for the Acholi, maintained that there was no enthusiasm for criminal prosecutions. Rather they wanted support for Acholi judicial processes, focused on particular rituals and orientated toward forgiveness. There were even claims that in its pure form, African justice has no punitive element. As time passed, customs associated with neighboring groups, including the Langi and Madi, were also foregrounded. In addition, councils of traditional leaders under newly established ‘paramount chiefs’ were established to implement the purportedly traditional procedures. These strategies have aimed at transforming and up-scaling local approaches, encouraging the evolution of hybrid measures that might in some way be incorporated in the formal Ugandan judicial system.

While there may arguably be benefits in such developments, in this article, we challenge the proposition that African justice can be readily adapted so that it deals exclusively with benign forms of social healing. Other tendencies are strong, and romantic notions can prove dangerously naive. We discuss processes occurring among the Madi, drawing on research carried out by one of us over the past 25 years (Allen 1991, 1992, 1996, 1997, 2006a, 2006b, 2007a; Allen and Storm 2012), and we include material based on investigations undertaken jointly in 2009. We examine beliefs and associated practices that are described in English—often by Madi speakers themselves—as witchcraft, wizardry, and poisoning. All the names of those involved have been changed.

THE CONTEXT AND THE KILLING

The Madi people live on both banks of the White Nile at the border of Uganda and what is now South Sudan. To the West are the Lugbara, and Madi customs and language are similar to those of the Lugbara (see Middleton 1960). However, the Madi also share customs with their neighbors to the East, the Acholi. Although the languages are very different, some words are shared and many Madi ideas about ritual authority, the spirit world and witchcraft, reveal a strong Acholi influence. Like many of the Acholi, and unlike most of the Lugbara, the Madi clans were loosely organized into small chiefdoms at the time British rule was being established in the early twentieth century, with chiefs (*opii*) or their close relatives having rainmaking powers, and clan elders responsible for lineage shrines at which ancestors were venerated. The Madi area of Uganda is now divided into districts, named after the larger towns, including Moyo and Adjumani. Laropi, where Tim

Allen's home was located in the 1980s, is situated at the Nile ferry crossing, about half way between them.

The majority of Madi people are Roman Catholic, and there are chapels at almost every trading center. This is the legacy of a deliberate policy under the Protectorate. From the mid-1910s, the area was given to the Italian Comboni Fathers for evangelism, with the intention of making it a bulwark against the spread of Islam from the Anglo Egyptian Sudan. During the mid-nineteenth century, the area had been a center of ivory trading and slave raiding from riverine bases. Then, from the 1870s, forts along the Nile were garrisoned with Turco-Egyptian soldiers, who found themselves cut off by the Mahdist uprising in Sudan. The notion of a specific Madi 'tribe' emerged out of these upheavals. Under the Ugandan Protectorate it was reinforced by population resettlement programs, linked to the control of sleeping sickness, and by the area being made a closed subdistrict, from which migration was restricted.

For much of the Protectorate period, the subdistrict was something of a backwater, even after it was opened up for labor migration. There was not much change after independence. However, Idi Amin came from northwest Uganda, and although it is hard to discern any particular benefits that accrued to the Madi people as a whole, they were perceived as beneficiaries by some of the dictator's opponents. They consequently faced persecution following his downfall, and most fled into southern Sudan. From 1980 they mainly lived in refugee settlements. In 1986, these were attacked by the Sudan Peoples' Liberation Army, and within months, almost all Ugandan Madis had fled home. The returned refugees found that food was scarce, provision of services by the new Ugandan government of Yoweri Museveni was minimal, and the capacities of aid agencies were very limited. Worse, Museveni's government had only recently seized power in Kampala and was facing armed resistance. Among the factions resisting his rule were the West Nile Bank Front, operating among the Lugbara to the west of the Madi, and the Holy Spirit Movement and later The Lord's Resistance Army, operating in Acholi area to the east, and repeatedly launching incursions into Madi territory.

Madi people are often noted as friendly and outgoing, and administrators and evangelists have characterized them as compliant. By the late 1930s, the Comboni Fathers had been so successful that they claimed the Madi were the "sole fully Catholic tribe in Africa" ('La Nigrizia,' December 1937). However, the multiple social upheavals have had consequences, and perhaps a sense of powerlessness in the face of externally imposed constraints and oppressions helps explain the Madi people's other reputation. They are said to have skills in poisoning and bewitching. It was a reputation noted under the Protectorate (Rowley 1940), and investigations were at one point made to establish if supposed poisons were genuinely toxic (DC, West Nile to PCNP, 13.05.1922, Entebbe Archives: Native Affairs 7371). Madis have retained their notoriety in this respect. It was a problem highlighted, for example, in their refugee settlements in southern Sudan (Harrell-Bond 1986:309–312).

The most common Madi term for poison is *inyinya*, sometimes used to refer to a concoction allegedly produced from snake venom, but more often to refer to things that might be accurately described in English as witchcraft or sorcery. Additional Madi terms may be applied to witchcraft-like phenomena too. A general word for the use of magic by a witch is *o'le*, and there are specific terms for kinds of witchcraft, such as *awola*, a word that the Madi share with the Acholi and Alur. Nevertheless, in the 1980s, *inyinya* was being used broadly for sudden deaths and instances of illness. As explained below, this was partly because it was viewed as a modern expression, relating to contemporary transformations. One reflection of that is Anyanya, the name given to

South Sudan forces during the first Sudanese civil war (1955–1972), in which many Madi served. The name derives from a South Sudanese variation of *inyinya*. The connotations of *inyinya* have expanded to refer to a range of new threats, too, and give a modern gloss to local notions, making them more acceptable to government and church officials. The term has come to encapsulate techniques used by witches and wizards (*olee*) to harm others, and such techniques might be used on occasion by ‘witch-doctors’ (*ojo*) when acting on behalf of their clients.

In the late 1980s, the population of Laropi and surrounding locations were struggling to open up farms and reestablish village life in a difficult environment. Many women generated income by distilling a local gin to sell to fishermen in the morning and to other men with small incomes—usually those working with aid programs, primary school teachers, and government soldiers stationed in the vicinity. Drunken men, and sometimes women, were a common sight. The long-standing government subchief and his staff were almost invariably among them. People were hungry, children kept dying, and a lack of resources meant bride-price transfers could not occur. Modes of public authority that had previously regulated social life were weak. A new system of directly elected local councils had been introduced, and these were exploring ways of exerting some degree of social control. Although participation in the councils was unpaid, there was some enthusiasm for them, because they lent a degree of official status to groups of mostly co-resident men sharing the same patrilineage. This was the immediate background to the events of September 1, 1988.

Tim Allen had been living in Laropi for over a year. He was visiting Moyo town to collect mail, when he was told that there was trouble at his home. He immediately set off on his motorbike, reaching his house at dusk. It was strangely quiet. Nearby a few soldiers were standing around. After a few minutes, the wife of his research assistant came to see him, later joined by her husband. Speaking in whispered and shocked tones, they told him that two of their neighbors had been killed by an angry mob following allegations about *inyinya*. A boy had died, Allen was told, and his father, Drani, a local council official, had accused Monika, the new wife of his uncle, of responsibility. At the funeral of the child, there were rumors about ‘poisoning,’ and the accused fled with her daughter Jane (from a previous marriage). Upon learning that they had gone, a group chased after them, tied them up, and took them back to Drani’s home. He began beating them, and ripped off their clothes. Monika was pregnant, but was thrown to the floor; Drani jumped up and down on her. It then started raining, so people took shelter, leaving Monika and Jane out in the open. They remained there until the rain stopped, when the torture continued. A fishhook was inserted into Monika’s genitals, attached to some string so it could be pulled. Jane was also beaten, and was forced to admit that her mother had given her some maize, which she had shared with the dead child. Monika then tried to run away, but was easily captured again. She was hit with rocks and Drani twisted her neck until she died. Her daughter then was beaten to death. Neighbors watched this without trying to intervene. Eventually the subchief was called, but it was too late. Now there was concern about the consequences: Monika’s relatives would demand compensation; there might be fighting. Also, the women’s bodies had been tossed into graves without proper rituals. So perhaps their spirits would possess people, or harm those who ignored their suffering as well as those who had a hand in it.

Immediately afterward, Drani was taken to Moyo town, and then to a large prison farm. The police officer who accompanied him confided in Allen that he was himself convinced that Monika had been a witch (*ole*), and that Drani’s actions were justified. Others interviewed by Allen were only marginally more ambivalent. At the prison, the officer-in-charge explained that Drani would

be kept there for his own protection. A Catholic priest who visited Drani seemed almost sympathetic. He said that Drani had expressed sorrow for what had happened, and had explained that he had been to consult an *oyo* ('witch-doctor'), who had confirmed that Monika was the culprit.

Drani was released a year or so later, without a trial. When Allen visited Laropi in 1991 he was back, living at his former home as if nothing had happened. There seemed to be a consensus that he had not been to blame; and even Monika's relatives appeared to accept this. There were rumors that Monika had been suspected of being a witch in the past, while living in a refugee camp in Sudan. This kind of gossip made the wife of Allen's research assistant anxious. She had been accused of having a special magic by her husband's family, which made him give her things. She had also given birth at the clinic, rather than at home, and so it was said that she had kept secret information that would normally be revealed during labor. She was frightened now that attacks on alleged witches would continue, and eventually, she left her husband and resettled in Moyo town.

Until the killing described in Laropi, Allen was unaware that the people he was living with were so actively and consciously engaged in a struggle for social accountability. In addition to arguments about the forms of familial and public authority which might best deal with disputes and regulate daily life, there were fraught debates about the nature of illness, spheres of moral action, and the allocation of responsibilities for suffering. These were less visible to the outsider, but no less significant. In the months following Monika's and Jane's deaths, Allen investigated other equally violent attacks on alleged witches. While finding them deeply disturbing, especially as he often knew those involved quite well, he came to interpret them in a rather functional manner, as a means of establishing order in extreme circumstances (Allen 1997). He argued that targeted individuals became scapegoats, and that their persecution was experienced as socially therapeutic. In doing so, he drew on the theoretical ideas of Girard (1979), although in large part, he was simply repeating views expressed by Madi residents in Laropi themselves.

SOCIAL CLEANSING IN THE LATE 1980s AND EARLY 1990s

One local understanding of the witch-hunts in the late 1980s was that they dealt with a root cause of people's troubles. The violence helped 'make ready/cleanse' (*ede*) the neighborhood by removing some of the culprits and terrifying others into acting sociably. These ideas related to notions of social accountability that might be called traditional, but they were not necessarily perceived in that way. The contemporary moral probity of witch-cleansing was reinforced by other factors, because it could be interpreted as both progressive and Christian.

Before the flight to southern Sudan, it would have been male elders and government chiefs who would mostly deal with domestic conflicts and accusations of *inyinya* during clan gatherings and at local courts. However, the elders' status was significantly weakened by economic and social changes in the later years of the Uganda Protectorate and the first decades of independence. Various factors, including the appointment of ritually insignificant men as government chiefs, the opportunities for younger men to find employment in southern Uganda, and cash cropping had eroded the capacity of elders to distribute resources among their relatives and arbitrate in disputes. The refugee experience further undermined their influence because they were unable even to negotiate bride-wealth payments. Cattle had been raided and hardly anyone had significant amounts of money. As a result, while elders might be turned to for explanations of disaster and disruption, their responses did not usually carry much weight. The situation was compounded

in the late 1980s when the men who had partly replaced the elders as local patrons, such as government chiefs and others in salaried positions, were in an equally weak position, unable to protect their clients and as impoverished as everyone else.

The lack of conventional modes of male control was most obvious in the behavior of young women. Sexual unions were unstable, partly due to the lack of resources for bride-price arrangements, and prompted talk about how Madi women were becoming like prostitutes. Women were also sometimes said—by women and men—to have potentially dangerous natures. New wives, moving from their father's to their husband's home, tended to be a particular focus of suspicion. In discussing family life, Allen's Madi informants would often draw a contrast between things that were 'of the home' (*baru*) and things of the 'outside' (*angwe*), the latter typically referring to unpopulated places, like forests and swamps. Things that were *angwe* could be described as *unzi*, a term that had a range of connotations including 'unpredictable,' 'dangerous,' 'amoral,' and even 'evil.' While not wanting to overstate the gendered aspects of these categories, there was a clear association of things of the home with the resident patrilineage, and an association of things of the outside with women, especially new arrivals, and also men described as being 'like women,' because they were living with their wife's brothers rather than their own. Following the return from Sudan, there were frequently voiced concerns that such people were threatening to bring things that were *unzi*, such as wild spirits or witchcraft, into the home. Sometimes they did so openly, and in dramatic ways. In the late 1980s, numerous women and a few men became possessed, seized not by ancestral ghosts but by strange and unknown entities.

The healers who tended to be consulted both in cases of wild spirit possession and when witchcraft was suspected were women referred to as *ojo* in the Madi language, or as *ajwaka*, the equivalent term in Acholi. The reason the Acholi term was often applied was that these diviner/mediums used therapies imported from the Acholi to deal with a situation which it seemed could not be handled with local techniques. In this way, they made it clear that they had knowledge about things which were outside and *unzi*. They maintained that they could control wild forces, and that by exposing people to things of the outside in regulated doses, they could facilitate healing and provide protection. It also meant that they were open to accusations that they might be causing the very problems they were purporting to solve. They countered such suggestions by linking their activities with Christianity. They commonly performed séances in a Sunday frock. They prayed frequently and as publicly as possible. Many asserted that their spirits were like angels who could communicate directly with God and the saints. During the years immediately after the return from Sudan, those *ojo* who gained a reputation for being effective at communicating with the wild spirits possessing women and at providing antiwitchcraft magic became relatively well-off. A couple were based at Laropi, others lived in nearby villages in the mountains and a few, including the most powerful, lived in forested places away from inhabited areas. It was one of these that Drani claimed to have consulted and who had confirmed to him that Monika was a witch and a poisoner.

As noted, the Catholic Church has historically been highly influential among the Madi people. Church policies have varied between dioceses, with the Madi coming under the Diocese of Arua, over which the Comboni order has had control. Unlike in some other parts of Uganda, the missionaries here persistently campaigned against patrilineal rituals and ancestral shrines as both pagan and satanic. Ancestor veneration was also linked to ideas about public authority, so those most associated with it were viewed as in particular need of evangelism. Additionally, ancestor veneration was vulnerable in that the ancestor shrines were visible, so could be quite easily

targeted. In contrast, ideas about witchcraft and possession were less tangible, and more adaptable, allowing the *ojo* who divined witchcraft in the 1980s and 1990s to be devout Christians, and to describe their spirits in Christian terms. Pentecostalism had become important in the Protestant churches, including the Ugandan Anglican community and was, at least informally, acceptable within the Ugandan Catholic Church too (Allen 1991, 1997, 2006).

This point about Pentecostalism being acceptable within Uganda Catholic communities has also been discussed by Jones (2008) and by Behrend (2011). The latter studied Catholic strategies against pagans in Tooro, Western Uganda, in the late 1990s. Those strategies differed in many respects, but had similar effects in that some forms of paganism were repressed in ways that in practice promoted their evolution and spread. In Tooro, witch-cleansing was a response to fears about cannibals turning people into zombies and then eating them. With the help of the Holy Spirit, lay Catholics identified culprits, and thereby affirmed their reality, taking them out of the private domain, making them a new means of revelation, and causing public panic and fear. “By trying to manage, explain and put a stop to the situation of internal terror, they ended up participating in the very process of producing the crisis” (Behrend 2011:2).

Among the Madi, there are also beliefs about zombies. Some witches are able to make their neighbors work for them in their farms during the night by turning them into zombie laborers. Lay Catholics have become concerned about the phenomenon in recent years, and some openly talk about the need to obtain magical protection. However, much more significant is the credence that has been given to ideas about *inyinya* since Protectorate times. By targeting the elders responsible for controlling *inyinya* and castigating both their rituals and their beliefs as satanic, the effect was not to counter concerns about *inyinya* with evidence that it does not exist, but to allow ideas about it to evolve and to become more pervasive. Christian teaching and practice not only persistently failed to clarify the Church’s position on *inyinya* but encouraged belief in its existence. So too did persistent references to ‘poisoning’ in the local courts, and the willingness of Protectorate officials and their successors to hear and adjudicate such cases.

There was no doubt that certain kinds of poison do exist—that was openly recognized by priests, medical staff, and government officials. Complaining about the activities of ‘poisoners’ could therefore be a way of publically asserting an awareness of scientific and biomedical interpretations. As priests explained to Allen in the 1980s, witchcraft is satanic and pagan, but poisoning is a reality. Doing it to people is evil, but not pagan. Yet, paradoxically, making such arguments did not preclude the same individuals describing *inyinya* passed by magic. One Madi Catholic priest who Allen interviewed described an incident in which he had seen someone poisoned by a touch. Such acts were widely accepted to be possible, and were frequently discussed. In formal courts, an accusation of poisoning was normally supposed to require evidence about the existence and use of a toxic substance. Nevertheless, it was no secret that the district magistrate in Moyo town had her office carefully checked for unusual objects before hearing cases. Almost everyone, it seemed, was convinced that some forms of *inyinya* might be just left on a path or in a crevice in someone’s home. It did not actually have to be eaten to be harmful.

These various understandings explain why, in August 1988, the Arua diocese newsletter went so far as to print an uncritical account of witch-cleansing, and considered it appropriate to provide the names of those who had been accused. It was reported that, following interrogation by council members and local chiefs, three families had been found guilty of ‘poisoning using native drugs, and for practicing witchcraft.’ One culprit reportedly admitted that she had killed four people

‘by poisoning’ and that she possessed five types of ‘witchcraftly poison.’ By the following year, such local council regulated witch hunts had become relatively normal. Councils were so confident about what they were doing that lower level committees were openly lobbying district level representatives to ask President Museveni to give them formal powers to try cases. There was little or no attempt to hide what was happening. In one incident, the torturing and killing of three accused witches was reported in the government-owned national newspaper. Again there was no critical commentary, the event being linked to attempts by villagers and local councils to ‘flush out bad elements’ in the neighborhood (New Vision, 30.11.89).

In a similar manner, all the other cases that Allen investigated in Laropi and the surrounding area involved the active participation of councils. They took a lead in the initiatives, and occasionally, they helped organize the torturing of the suspects and their expulsion or execution. The council system offered the opportunity for people to take action in defense of patrilineal public authority, and thereby to help establish viable communities. The fact that the councils had been introduced under government auspices provided support for their activities in a comparable way to the support spirit mediums derived from Catholicism. It indicated an external recognition that people were not acting in their own self-interest but for the good of all, and also that they were acting legitimately.

When Allen visited Laropi again in 1991, the process had been taken a stage further. The persecution of witches with impunity had shown that it was possible to enforce social accountability through the elected council system. No new executions were reported from the previous year, and it was claimed that things had improved now that suspects had been chased away or chastised and then watched carefully. Allen also found that there had been an enhancement of the councils’ authority connected with another shift in the connotations of *inyinya*. Here again the Catholic Church inadvertently played a part.

In the early 1990s, the prevalence of HIV was reported to still be relatively low in Moyo District compared with parts of southern Uganda. Nevertheless, prominent Madi men had died and people had listened to the radio and knew about the epidemic. Death-bed statements of men dying of the disease were read out in church services, explaining how immoral behavior had been the source of their affliction. Villagers were becoming afraid of educated or well-dressed visitors, and a whole range of affliction symptoms were being interpreted as AIDS. One young woman, the daughter of a leading local council member, had dropped out of school, having been found to be possessed. She had been seized by 15 wild spirits, all of whom were the ghosts of people who had been blown up by a mine in 1981. In *séances* it had become clear that the spirits had been sent by God to show her 175 medicines, including four that could cure AIDS. Even before her training as an *ojo* was complete, there were a large number of people waiting to be treated at her home. In this context, AIDS was discussed as a new kind of *inyinya*. Allen was also told that women who spent too much time with soldiers or moved between sexual partners were themselves a form of *inyinya*, poisoning those around them. HIV/AIDS was being viewed as a form of *inyinya* that had full government, church, and biomedical recognition, and confronting those associated with it was unequivocally an appropriate act. As with other forms of *inyinya*, HIV/AIDS was associated especially with marginal women. Thus, in July 1991 a group of women living together in Laropi without a male household head were accused of ‘prostitution’ at a local council meeting, and a decision was taken to expel them. They were looted, beaten, and chased away. “Prostitute” and “witch” had become almost synonymous terms. Fears and responses to HIV/AIDS had reinforced

the local councils' position as guardians of their villages, facilitating action to further control female behavior and regulation of the moral order.

TWENTY YEARS LATER: THE INTRODUCTION OF DEMOCRATIC WITCH-CLEANSING

Twenty years later, local councils have become much more firmly established, even in those parts of Uganda that have been unsympathetic to Museveni's government. All over Uganda, they have monitored and shaped social life, and because of the direct system of elections at the village level, have acted within local frameworks, taking into account local concerns. As Ugandan campaigning against HIV/AIDS intensified, with the clear focus on behavioral change and emphasis on family values, councils played a key role (Allen 2006b). In Madi area, this may have played a part in a dramatic decline in rates. It has been argued that a dramatic drop in HIV seroprevalence from 5% in 1993 to 2.7% in 2000 was probably linked to effective promotion of sexual abstinence among young people by religious and traditional leaders, supported by district authorities (Green 2003). If that is so, the witch-cleansing in Laropi suggests it involved rather than more than just advice. Since then, reported rates have crept back up, perhaps due to population influxes from South Sudan and displacements due to LRA attacks. Nevertheless, seroprevalence remains relatively low compared with neighboring areas.

In Laropi, many of the adults living in and around Drani's home have died, including the three brothers with whom Allen had shared a compound. AIDS is reported as the cause, but there is less of a link made between the disease and *inyinya* than there was at the turn of the 1990s. Another change is that explicit Acholi influences in the form of séances have seemingly disappeared. Possession has become more contained and is more overtly Pentecostal. New 'born again' forms of Christianity have become much more prevalent, both inside and outside the Catholic Church, and lay Christian activists have intensified the earlier campaigns against ancestor veneration as both satanic and pagan. Groups of Christian activists have now destroyed many of the shrines that still existed in the 1980s, including those that had been reestablished when the refugees had returned. Ritual objects have been hidden away and family altars buried. At least superficially, ideas about the interpersonal and spiritual causes of suffering are set aside in favor of visits to the local health clinic, which provides some very basic medical care, or to prayers at church services. Beneath the surface, however, matters are more complicated (Allen and Storm 2012).

With respect to the killings that had occurred in Laropi in 1988, most of those interviewed by Reid at first expressed a degree of embarrassment or remorse about them. However, further discussion uncovered contradictory views. One woman in her forties began by saying that: "The majority of people don't believe the women were guilty, they feel they were wrongly killed. It is very painful for people to remember." Yet when asked about more recent witchcraft accusations in the area, she commented that if she was the judge, she would make the culprits drink their own "poison" so that they too would die.

Drani himself was interviewed at length by Reid in 2009. His remarks revealed a belief that killing suspected witches had been an effective deterrent. In his view, killing an individual was justified in order to protect the broader rights and security of the community. He asked: "Why should we protect the right of a person instead of the right of a community? . . . It was self-defense to kill (Monika)—she killed a child who was innocent. There is no regret for that. . . . No one

in the community regrets what was done, so why mind about them?" A few weeks after this interview, Drani was found dead in a latrine. He probably had a heart attack, but there were other interpretations. Several people explained that Drani himself had been haunted by the ghosts of those he had killed, and his assertions about the probity of his actions in the interview had brought their swift final punishment.

A rather different rendering of what happened in 1988 was provided by a young man, now active in local politics, who had witnessed the event as a child. He spoke in English about the incident on several occasions, and was manifestly still upset by what he had seen. He recalled that Drani was wearing gum boots and "brutally jumping on Monika," saying "you people are afraid to kill her I will do it." A group of three women who also were present at the killing were similarly able to describe events in detail. All told much the same story. At one level, these witnesses, recollecting events from many years before, described Drani as just a brutal criminal, but they acknowledge that he was left alone when he returned from prison. Indeed, he had been employed as the security guard at a local primary school. Moreover, Monika's relatives never actually extracted recompense or secured compensation. Others interviewed, who had not actually been present, were more openly willing to wonder if she was really a witch after all.

An issue on which there was a degree of consensus was that there had been progress in dealing with the problem of witches killing people with *inyinya*. However, most explained this with reference to a variety of factors, and few highlighted Drani's vigilante methods. Reasons mentioned included a perceived decline in unexpected and sudden deaths, which most recognized as being largely connected with the increased supply of food. Provision of better health care through clinics was also sometimes cited. Nevertheless, even those who vigorously argued that Monika and her daughter were innocent rarely accepted that all accusations of witchcraftly poisoning were false. Rather they extolled more humane and efficient methods of finding out who was guilty and allocating appropriate punishments. Contrary to Drani's assertions, they tended to maintain that it was witchcraft elections that had helped most to deter witches from acting against their neighbors. These had developed from the involvement of local councils in such activities decades previously.

According to people interviewed in Laropi, it was in 2006 that this novel arrangement for dealing with witches was introduced. In Olia, a village in Adjumani District, there had been a spate of apparently inexplicable deaths. The prevalence of witches was feared to be high. Bad people were said to be moving around at night and doing terrible things to their neighbors. To deal with the problem, suspects were publically identified, elections were held, and the results were made public and discussed at semiformalized court hearings. Those found guilty were expelled from the area, and in some instances the results were broadcast regionally on the Trans-Nile radio station. In 2008, the approach was replicated in Ubbi North, a village near Laropi trading center. Almost everyone asked maintained that the proceedings in both cases had been outstandingly successful—the main exceptions being those who suffered the consequences. In general, the view was that witches had become fearful of using their skills to harm others. During 2009, discussions were held with residents of Olia and Ubbi North villages, including with those who organized the elections and some of those who were accused.

The witch-cleansing in Olia village is talked about as the model that others have followed. The local council official who presided over the elections and subsequent expulsion of witches was disarmingly straightforward, reflecting a perception that it was something of which to be proud. The population of the village was called to a meeting to discuss the high incidence of suspected *inyinya* use by witches. An election committee was appointed by the local village council, and

communitywide voting by secret ballot was instituted as a means to identify and expel those found guilty. This system was explained as both a reaction to the inadequacy of existing legal mechanisms to handle witchcraft accusations, and as an effective deterrent to antisocial behavior. As the local council official explained, "Instead of suppressing the whole community let us suppress the witches instead. Now we have peace." Those found guilty (three men and four women) were mostly migrants, and it was openly acknowledged that they were weak and poor, and therefore expendable.

The local council took its responsibilities for these procedures very seriously, taking detailed records of the election results and the hearings that followed, as well as photographing the accused. The register was used to describe the purpose of the vote and the method by which it was conducted, and to record the names of the accused, the number of votes against them, and their time frame for leaving the village. The introductory text (written in English) reads as follows: "Following the village general meeting held on 11/09/06 about night dancers/witchcraft and poisoning which have become a threat in the village, all members reached a concrete resolution, that any member of the village found to be involved in the above practices must quit the village as stated in the village by-laws. This was determined through secret name writing of a suspected person and inserting it into a suggestion /voting box on the same day 11/09/06."

The setting up of a democratic judicial mechanism for witch-cleansing in Olia proved, as the local council official responsible explained, an inspiration for others. This was confirmed by investigations into the introduction of similar procedures in Ubbi North. Residents interviewed explained that there had been an increase of deaths in this location. Witches were thought to be the cause, but it had proven difficult to identify who the witches were. There were some people who were suspected, but doubts were raised regarding the effectiveness of making accusations, because proof would be needed. Those making accusations might themselves become vulnerable to prosecution. It would also make them vulnerable to "witchcraftly attack." In response to these concerns, the village local council and community members gathered to pass 'bylaws.' The Trans-Nile Broadcasting Service reported on their deliberations, disseminating the newly created bylaw that "for anybody committing a capital offence like murder or wizardry in their village, the Sub-County authorities and police should allow them (to) kill and destroy properties of such individuals" (TBS Report, August 17, 2008).

As in Olia Village, rather than killings, the local councils adopted electoral mechanisms to identify and expel accused witches. A committee, including a 'Chief Electoral Commissioner' from a neighboring village, oversaw the election to ensure transparency and legitimacy. All residents, including those suspected and eventually expelled were eligible to participate. A total of 27 individuals were implicated as witches. The eight who received the highest number of votes were expelled, while 16 others were issued warnings and continued to have their behavior monitored. Of the eight expelled, seven were women. It was explained that: "Women are associated with food, water and children, those are not the activities of men. So the majority of wizards and witches are women." A female herbalist commented that: "Women are mostly the poisoners, it is rarely men. This is because women are short tempered."

Reid had the opportunity to meet an accused woman (referred to as Alice) who had been expelled from her village and was living at the police station in Moyo town, the district capital. She had been there for several months. She sat outside the office on a bench alone all day and slept there overnight in order to be protected from the threat of mob justice. Reid also spoke with

the woman who had first accused her of witchcraft (referred to as Sandra) to understand the chain of events that led to Alice's expulsion.

Sandra explained that she had met Alice, an acquaintance, at the market in August of 2008, and was greeted by her. Sandra described the interaction that ensued as an "ambush." She instantly experienced "pain and tingling sensations"—a clear indication of poisoning: "The pain extended over five minutes up one arm to the other hand and I was in much pain. I was poisoned before so I knew it was poisoning. No other sickness can be felt as abruptly as poisoning." Alice was arrested, and had subsequently been transferred between local council headquarters and various police stations in the region. Several attempts had been made to reintegrate her into her own village or re-settle her in a new one. But all had failed. Her difficulties were compounded by the fact that her expulsion from Laropi was reported on the radio, echoing the publication of 'poisoners' names in the Catholic newsletter during the late 1980s. The radio report claimed that she had touched her victim "with unusual sophisticated hazardous deadly poison in Laropi market," and that all those who came in contact with the victim were also infected.

When interviewed, Alice denied being involved in witchcraft and offered alternative explanations for why she might have been accused, including jealousy of her crops, a disgruntled relative spreading the story for revenge, or because her second husband had failed to pay appropriate bride-price for her. Disturbingly, at the time of the conversation, Alice's three children remained in Laropi, and she had not been able to see them. In describing her separation from them she became very distressed and began crying. As the police officer responsible for her case in Moyo explained, her husband's family refused to have her back, saying that they are sure she is a witch, while her own brothers would not accommodate her either. Apparently they said that if they catch her somewhere where she is unprotected, "they will work on her and kill her."

Another expelled person interviewed was the man who held the highest recorded number of votes in Ubbi North. He was originally from a village in Metu, several kilometers away. He had lived in Ubbi North for more than 30 years, but he was still not considered a "brother of the home," and thus could be more easily identified as an outsider. Accusing a male migrant had the obvious asset of directing attention away from the main resident patrilineages. That was important, because Ubbi North had gained a reputation as being a village of witches, so enthusiasm for elections was partly a way of countering such gossip, particularly if it could be blamed on unscrupulous migrants. As a male resident of a neighboring village noted: "In the past, people saw Ubbi North as a village which is for wizards. People would say it's a bad place to live. The elections got rid of bad people and allowed for good people to live peacefully. . . . They were going to kill the accused if they didn't have the elections. The election is the only way to get rid of wizards. People who are evicted can't go back. They are isolated with no company."

Interestingly, another village of Laropi has a similar reputation, but has not held elections. Here, it was reported, accused witches were still being dealt with as they were in Laropi in the 1980s. A male resident in his sixties explained: "Pakoma village is a home for wizards. The outside people think that there are wizards here and also those within. This is still believed to date. It has only calmed a bit because those caught are killed. The majority of wizards are women [*sic*]. . . . Many people have died from poisoning in the past—it was common, but now it is less because the wizards fear repercussions they will face." It was not possible to investigate this information closely, but it is in comparison with such accounts that elections are extolled as both progressive and more effective.

Several of those interviewed continued to express the view that if a witch was caught in the act, it would be reasonable to kill her or him on the spot. Nevertheless, those taking this position still tended to extol the benefits of the elections. A danger of killing witches was that there might be legal action and those doing the killing might end up being sent to prison. At the same time, it was very difficult to catch a witch red handed, and eliciting the kinds of evidence required in conventional courts was impossible. In any case, it was argued, the expulsions could be an indirect form of killing. Those who were evicted might be driven to desperate measures. As the police officer who was protecting Alice in Moyo town remarked: "It is like a different form of mob justice. . . . People are frequently hanging themselves in Ubbi North and in Metu area." He disapproved of what was going on, but was definitely in a minority. For most of those interviewed, removing witches from their neighborhood was crucial, and the fact that torture was still sometimes used to extract confessions was rarely perceived as an issue. In democratic cleansing, the judgment is collective and guilt a matter of consensus. Few questioned the culpability of those accused, and even some of those who had reservations seemed to feel that justice was still being done. As two Catholic priests observed: "More people have gone to school and have learned human values. . . . Also the human rights agenda is known and being defended." But *inyinya* remains a threat: "It's not generally proven that people are wizards, but whenever there is smoke there must be fire."

Not all Catholic priests agreed. Another caused some amusement among his congregation when he proclaimed in a sermon that it was easy to avoid being accused of witchcraft, it was just a question of making sure that you are not a migrant, an unprotected woman, poor, use farm land that someone else wants, or be someone whose relatives have died. He was making the point that those accused were invariably vulnerable in some way, almost by definition. Even those enthusiastic about witch killing and the new elections tended to accept that point of view, or explicitly promote it. As one Laropi resident put it: "Wizards are poor and will be jealous, poverty drives people to kill." All those targeted are in some way socially expendable.

CONCLUSION

The processes we have described are not the form of traditional or hybrid local mechanism extolled by those activists and scholars who have been promoting indigenous customs as a viable alternative to formal justice. As was discussed in the introduction, in northern Uganda, accountability rituals associated with particular populations have been vigorously promoted. This has largely been in the context of the war between the government and the LRA, and a campaign to semiformalize them has been linked to lobbying against the involvement of the ICC (Allen 2006a, 2007a). The result was that a range of African rituals were listed in the June 2007 Agreement on Accountability and Reconciliation with the LRA delegation, including one from the Madi called "*tonu ci koka*" (Agreement 2007). Like the other rituals mentioned, this refers to an arrangement between patrilineages to deal with homicides and to enhance social stability under the moral authority of male elders.

Both members of the Anglican and Catholic churches supported these activities, especially among the Acholi. They were effectively encouraging the kinds of practices associated with ancestral veneration that were at the same time being castigated as pagan in Madi villages. The contradiction was at least partly acknowledged by some of those involved. A few, including a

retired bishop, took the view that African ways had been wrongly repressed, and this is only now changing. Most were evasive, or explained it away with references to the policies of different dioceses or the contingencies of the particular situation. There were also those who went along with the trend, while privately expressing serious doubts about it on both religious and practical grounds.

However, leaving aside those doubts associated with evangelical agendas, the political and social risks involved in promoting traditional justice soon became evident even to most passionate enthusiasts. To systematically perform the selected ceremonies, it was necessary to establish councils of clan elders and paramount chiefs, largely with aid funds. That immediately became a cause of tension between competing claimants. In addition, the setting up of systems of purportedly traditional governance was a matter of concern for those reluctant to accept these forms of public authority—especially when it came to things like land disputes. Traditional governance was manifestly not something likely to improve the position of women, migrants, or marginal individuals. It also became apparent that many elders did not know how to perform the chosen rituals, and only a small minority of those returning from the LRA actually participated in them (Allen and Schomerus 2006). Moreover, the focus on the rituals of specific ethnic groups in northern Uganda did not readily lend itself to national reconciliation. On the contrary, the attempts to incorporate them into the Ugandan legal system through a special division of the High Court implied that some Ugandans should have access to formal judicial protections, while others did not need them, or were not yet culturally ready for them (Allen 2007a).

A few years ago, raising these sorts of concerns was controversial (Were 2006), but they have come to be broadly acknowledged (Baines 2007). Those still promoting local procedures in northern Uganda have tried to adapt strategies accordingly. However, Madi witch-cleansing draws attention to an additional issue, one that remains persistently ignored in the mainstream transitional justice debates, and not just with respect to Uganda. It may be that some forms of local justice will encourage reconciliation, but others will not, and those forms can just as readily take on hybrid qualities. Social integration is always partly premised on measures for social exclusion, and local justice is likely to be much concerned with it. In populations where afflictions of diverse kinds are given interpersonal interpretations, including causality associated with phenomena that might be termed witchcraft or sorcery, local justice may be far from benign. It is factually incorrect to assert, as some activists have, that in the past northern Ugandan rituals associated with the ending of disputes or curtailing the activities of antisocial individuals lacked a punitive element. It is simply that activists have selected ceremonies that appear to coincide in some way with their own values. In several respects, a similar process has been occurring to that during Protectorate times, when British officials administered in alliance with various traditional chiefs and elders.

The Madi example underlines the fact that local justice can have qualities that diverge dramatically from international norms, even where they appear to replicate or mirror aspects of them. In several respects, it is a case comparable with circumstances described by anthropologists elsewhere (e.g., Ashworth 2000; Comaroff and Comaroff, 1993; Fisiyi and Geschiere 1990; Geschiere 1997, 2013; Geschiere and Fisiyi, 1994; Moore and Sanders 2001; Niehaus, 1998, 2010; West 2005). In the past few years, scores of thieves and witches are reported to have been killed by “justice populaire” in the Eastern DR Congo, some being burned alive (Verweijen 2013). Across the border from Laropi in South Sudan, a policy of supporting local customs as an aspect of governance has resulted in the reemergence of witchcraft courts run by chiefs among the

Azande (Allen 2007b). Also a form of democratic witch-cleansing similar to that described here for the Ugandan Madi has been introduced among the Kuku of Kajokeji (Leonardi et al. 2010:66). On occasion, the formal legal mechanisms are effectively co-opted too. An attempt was made to do that in parts of South Africa (Ralushai 1996), while in the Central African Republic, a United Nations study of prisons found that more than half of those being held had been accused of witchcraft (Njeng'ere 2010).

Meanwhile, in Uganda, one of the newly created 'traditional' paramount chiefs from the north of the country has called for the passing of a tough ordinance to punish people involved in witchcraft (Uganda Radio Network 2011a). In fact the existing Ugandan Witchcraft Act already allows for the prosecution of witchcraft or use of 'other supernatural means' to cause harm (Uganda Witchcraft Act 1957). So the shifting of witch-trials into the formal system is not inconceivable. Efforts to do so have occurred before (Abrahams 1985) and, somewhat bizarrely, witch cleansing in Uganda was actually promoted in salacious BBC radio and television reporting in 2010 (Kuper 2010). In November 2013, a man was hacked to death outside the house in which Allen was staying in Gulu town. There were witnesses, but no one was held to account. When asked about it, a common response was that the victim "did good to die" (Porter and Tapscott 2014). Here, in the place where the new Acholi "paramount chief" has his palace and where traditional justice has been promoted so vociferously, vigilante attacks on alleged criminals are on the rise. The emphasis is on the social exclusion of unpopular and unimportant individuals, the promotion of moral order, and the preservation of 'social harmony' (Porter 2012). There are concerns that HIV rates are suddenly on the rise, now that the LRA are no longer a threat and migration into urban areas is possible (Ocowon 2010). There is much talk too about the activities of witches (Uganda Radio Network 2011b 2013). The directly elected local councils are playing a leading role in responses, and the similarities to events observed among the Madi are striking.

In conflict and postconflict settings, like northern Uganda, "traditional" rituals and practices may offer forms of accountability within a familiar and trusted context in which popular participation flourishes and social healing occurs. It may therefore be valuable to support them. However, at present the evidence base for assessing such strategies is weak. Results are doubtless better in some circumstances than in others. As we have underlined in this article, there is also a need for caution. Romantic ideas about old customs or African justice are dangerously misleading. In enhancing and enforcing mutuality, particularly at times of social upheaval and rapid change, local practices are likely to be dynamic, adaptable, and sometimes highly punitive. Developments like those among the Madi of northern Uganda have specific qualities, but in general terms are far from unusual. Older approaches may be given a modern gloss, but when things turn nasty, it will be the weakest and most marginal who are likely to suffer the consequences.

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