UGANDA: IN-BETWEEN WAR AND PEACE

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Sverker Finnström. *Living With Bad Surroundings: War, History, and Everyday Moments in Northern Uganda.* Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2008. The Cultures and Practice of Violence series. xi + 286 pp. Photographs. Maps. Figures. Notes. References. Index. $79.95. Cloth. $23.95. Paper.

Chris Dolan. *Social Torture: The Case of Northern Uganda, 1986–2006.* New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2009. xiv + 339 pp. Figures. Abbreviations. Annexes. Bibliography. $95.00. Cloth.

Susanne Buckley-Zistel. *Conflict, Transformation and Social Change in Uganda: Remembering After Violence.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008. Rethinking Peace and Conflict Studies series. xix + 192 pp. Glossary. Notes. Bibliography. Index. $85.00. Cloth.

Since President Yoweri Museveni captured Ugandan state power in 1986 with the promise of liberating the country from the travails of its colonial past, Ugandans have simultaneously experienced peace and war, prosperity as well as economic impoverishment, and a crisis in security alongside increased protection. Explaining how and why these opposing circumstances coexist, and exploring the ramifications for the future prospects of the country, are the shared subjects of the three books under review. Each offers novel theoretical approaches, tested by years of empirical research in the north and east of the country. Collectively, their conclusions challenge dominant national and international narratives about the nature of war and peace in Uganda in the last quarter-decade.

Finnström's account of the now twenty-three-year-old conflict in Acholiland (in northern Uganda) starts from the perspective of those who have lost the most. Over the course of a number of different field trips between 1996 and 2006, Finnström lived with, listened to, and learned from persons—particularly youth—who had been violently forced from their homes and who had fled into displacement camps. In northern Uganda he was struck by what he describes as a profound struggle to maintain "normalcy" within the anything but normal surroundings of this war; he describes in stunning detail the cosmological resources drawn upon to address these appalling conditions. His focus, then, is on people's "existential uncertainties, intellectual worries, political frustrations, and religious queries in a situation of armed

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conflict and great social unrest, or how people seek meaning as they engage the world and their humanity" (28). At times poetic, often philosophical, Finnström brings the reader to a new level of insight into war and its effects on the lived realities of affected persons—and how and why it is possible for people to survive the impossible day by day. Equally important, he vividly connects these personal stories to the political domain, unveiling, as each chapter evolves, the politics that divide people at the community level (such as between generations of elder and younger Acholi, or between the Acholi-dominated Lord's Resistance Army [LRA] and Acholi civilians), the national level (distinguishing between the southern and northern regions of Uganda), and the international level (differentiating between humanitarians and war-affected populations).

That the war in the north is in part a product of national propaganda regarding the nature of the LRA is now broadly recognized; but for decades the Ugandan government convinced international donors, humanitarians, media, and its own citizens alike that the LRA was little more than a rag-tag group of spiritual bandits gone wild, thereby justifying a military solution to the persistent northern "problem" and the creation of massive displaced persons camps. Finnström has perhaps been one of the few to challenge conventional views, arguing that a close reading of LRA communications illustrates not only that the LRA is in fact a rebel group with a political cause and well-defined message, but also that most ordinary northern Ugandans, in protest against their exclusion, oppression, and violation within the Ugandan state apparatus, agree openly with that cause (although not the means). This conclusion at first flies in the face of logic, given the LRA's ruthless persecution, killing, mutilation, and abduction of the Acholi populace; yet as Finnström's chapter on displacement illustrates with great tragedy, so too does the Ugandan government's policy of counterinsurgency, offering some insight into why this long-suffering population may find some sense of common purpose with their primary victimizers.

Finnström argues that the war in Acholiland, far from being "local," is in many ways global; he illustrates convincingly how the "international community," largely well-meaning humanitarians and Western donors to Museveni's government, aid and abet its policy of subordination because they are blind to the underlying political and structural violence committed in the north. The war is regarded primarily as a humanitarian crisis, best responded to with food, medical aid, and material aid, which in turn sustain the IDP camps. Further unraveling the war's multiple layers of complexity, Finnström goes on to illustrate cleavages within Acholiland that contribute to war and its continuation. Elders once blessed the rebels, only later to abandon their cause and neglect the concerns of the younger generation; they are called "veranda elders" and are said to sit idly by, reminiscing about old power structures, and commenting on the moral decay of youth and women while they exacerbate the war through corruption and, according to the LRA, betrayal. Thus the Acholi community itself, argues Finnström, begs for a process of reconciliation, not a war of extermination.

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Despite all the forces conspiring against the Acholi—and the descriptions of the war and the organization in displaced persons camps convinces one that the odds are stacked against them—Finnström's most powerful contribution is his description of the sociocultural resources of ordinary Acholi. He assesses with sincerity the productive role of rumors and vengeful ghosts (*cen*)—persons who died violently during the war—and he describes Acholi practices of reconciliation through ritual and spirit mediums. In doing so, he illustrates that in the highly constrained confines of the camp, where organization or protest against perpetrators can and does lead to physical harm, those affected by the war do not passively accept their fate, but carve out spaces of critique, self-protection, and where space permits, resistance.

Chris Dolan spent twenty-four months working in the north between 1998 and 2006, around the same time period that Finnström did. And like Finnström, he is devoted to the process of "listening" to local voices and taking seriously the subjective experiences of persons most affected by the conflict. Again, like Finnström, Dolan argues that the LRA is far more organized, sophisticated, and political than its popular image implies; in *Social Torture* he identifies the international community as complicit in prolonging the war because of its refusal to understand the local political roots and social contours of the conflict. He focuses his attention, however, on the "productive" outcomes of the war—political, economical, and psychological—that have accrued to the Museveni regime. In fact, for Dolan, calling the crisis in the north a "war" is in itself misleading; rather, he sees the government's policies in the north as a centrally and purposefully organized form of collective social torture: "For social torture, or torture on a mass scale, does not describe the behaviour of a few individuals[;] . . . rather it involves a systematic process and dynamic which is enabled by a range of actors, including governments, multilaterals, NGOs and academics" (258).

Dolan argues that relations with the north, one of the predominant issues in Ugandan postcolonial politics until Museveni eventually seized power, remain a major political preoccupation—indeed the north is the only region that poses a challenge to the southern leader's legitimacy and power base. Fully cognizant of the military and political challenges that would be posed by an organized greater north, the government considers "war" as a convenient means of crushing that threat and keeping future attempts to reorganize in check. According to Dolan, the metanarrative of the war—that it is a fratricidal contest of Acholi killing Acholi—has justified Museveni's policy of militarization and social torture to his southern constituents and Western donors.

To illustrate his argument, Dolan spends considerable time and goes into impressive detail describing and analyzing the organization of the displaced persons camps, where more than 90 percent of the Acholi population lived at the height of the insurgency. He argues that the displacement of such a high proportion of the population (made dependent on the

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humanitarian "servicing" of the camps for more than a decade) debilitated, dehumanized, and devalued ordinary Acholi, the potential base of support and power for the rebels and possible challenge to the power of the current administration. The violent divide between the rebels and the local population, moreover, abetted the process of social torture and advanced the government's goal of ruling the country unchecked. In the end, few perpetrators on either the LRA or government side came to view the resolution of the "conflict" as even desirable: the policy served elites from both sides.

The LRA and Ugandan army often resembled each other in their tactics; indeed because individuals often switched sides, the two armies were often composed of the same personnel. For the Acholi, therefore, the ambiguity of who was a "perpetrator" often provoked a sense of "profound disorientation" (223). Over time, argues Dolan, the social torture of northern Ugandans became so routine that ordinary people began to adopt similar actions—and thus to implement the policy themselves. The collective loss of identity that followed, as well as the impotence of local initiatives, undermined their chances of mounting any form of resistance, suggesting how "an entire social group allowed itself to be tortured" (224).

In perhaps his most compelling contribution, Dolan illustrates how, in these circumstances, men were unable to fulfill the expectations of traditional Acholi gender roles and therefore fell back to mimicking a hegemonic masculinity. In the process they made everyone more vulnerable, and they themselves became both victim and perpetrator. Dolan argues persuasively that this process of social emasculation and gendered persecution serves the interests of the Ugandan state by immobilizing the north as a political presence and thus inserting it into the Ugandan polity in a subordinate position, dependent on outside forces. In contrast to Finnström, then, he sees very little room for local agency or resistance.

In *Conflict Transformation and Social Change*, Susanne Buckley-Zistel takes us to another corner of Uganda, the east, thus adding yet another perspective on the political culture of the Ugandan state today, "in-between war and peace" (145). She asks why the 1986 rebellion in Iteso, which was resolved through peaceful mediation in 1992, developed into the present-day set of antagonistic relations that divide the Iteso region from Museveni's regime. She concludes that the original mediation process resulted in only a "shallow peace," although this term is never fully defined. Adopting a hermeneutic approach, Buckley-Zistel takes up the challenge posed by John A.Vasquez ("War Endings: What Science and Constructivism Can Tell Us," *Millennium* 26, 3 [1997]: 651–78): that we must seek to understand not only how war is socially invented through the creation of the "other," but also how war is potentially uninvented—how peace can be imagined. She argues that "a violent conflict is deeply embedded in the historical and social continuities that run through a society and that influence the mutual perception of the parties to the conflict." What is more, such conflict is

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shaped by perpetuating factors such as "economic gains and interest and how they influence each other" (14).

Her analysis of the Iteso insurgency, drawing on a series of in-depth interviews in the year 2000 with national and local leaders alike, underscores meta- and counternarratives about the causes of the war and the subsequent attempts of the Museveni government to pacify the Iteso through acknowledgment of past wrong-doing (such as the disastrous impact of dismantling the border militia that had protected the Iteso from Karamoja cattle raiders) and the promise of reparation and economic development. The government failed in both policies. With this as her context, the author illustrates how the local population remembers the origins of the conflict—as an attempt of the Museveni regime to punish the Iteso for atrocities committed during the Luwero war, in which Iteso made up a large faction of Obote's Special Forces and were responsible for human rights abuses (and, not coincidentally, for opposition to Museveni's National Resistance Army). In the eyes of the Iteso, the President maintains this focus through the present, purposefully excluding the region from the benefits of the Ugandan state.

With this as her background, Buckley-Zistel aspires to examine the invention of peace. But within this context, she seems to do the opposite, arguing that the drive to build an internal collective identity has reproduced the Museveni regime as "the other." The consequences of this process are less than clear. To be sure, compared to the northern situation, the setting in Iteso is one of relative peace, despite the interim spillover effects of the LRA war into Soroti District during Operation Iron Fist II. Nonetheless, even though the conditions in Iteso are less severe than in Acholiland, what can be expected from reconciliation, from peace? The strength of the book is the perspective it offers on the historical origins of the conflict. What it lacks (especially in comparison to the other two books under review) is the kind of nuanced detail that comes with long-term and in-depth fieldwork; we hear little about the former rebels and their relationship to civilians, about the impact of the war and impoverishment on the people of the region, or about current government policies.

All three texts provide commendable new perspectives on the Ugandan state, adding substance and complexity to issues of state policy, local security, and social development in Uganda today. Together the three books make clear the need for a new conceptual understanding of standard international interventions. As Dolan argues, by unveiling the multitude of actors responsible for the suffering of others, such counternarratives present a picture of Uganda that challenges what has hitherto been considered acceptable state policy and illustrate how current legal structures and responses are inadequate.

It is a pity that the texts do not incorporate more analysis of the Juba Peace Talks held between the Ugandan government and LRA in 2006–2008,

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which involved donor and humanitarian agencies as well as large delegations of civil society leaders from the greater north, including the Iteso. By revealing the political, economic, and social inequalities that characterize the country today, they provided for (and gave legitimacy to) a series of mechanisms of reconciliation. Although the talks failed to produce a signed agreement, they did provide a space in which counternarratives could be put forth and listened to (and therefore gave legitimacy to the local initiatives toward those goals). At the same time, with the reversion to an armed pursuit of the LRA and the devastating human costs to the Congolese and Sudanese populations that resulted, the analyses offered in these three texts remain as pertinent today as when they were written. Buckley-Zistel's closing remarks sum up the contributions of the three books well. To understand what lies "in-between war and peace" requires "paying attention to the local, often neglected voices of those who were affected by the violence and who have to live with the kind of peace that prevails in the future" (145).

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