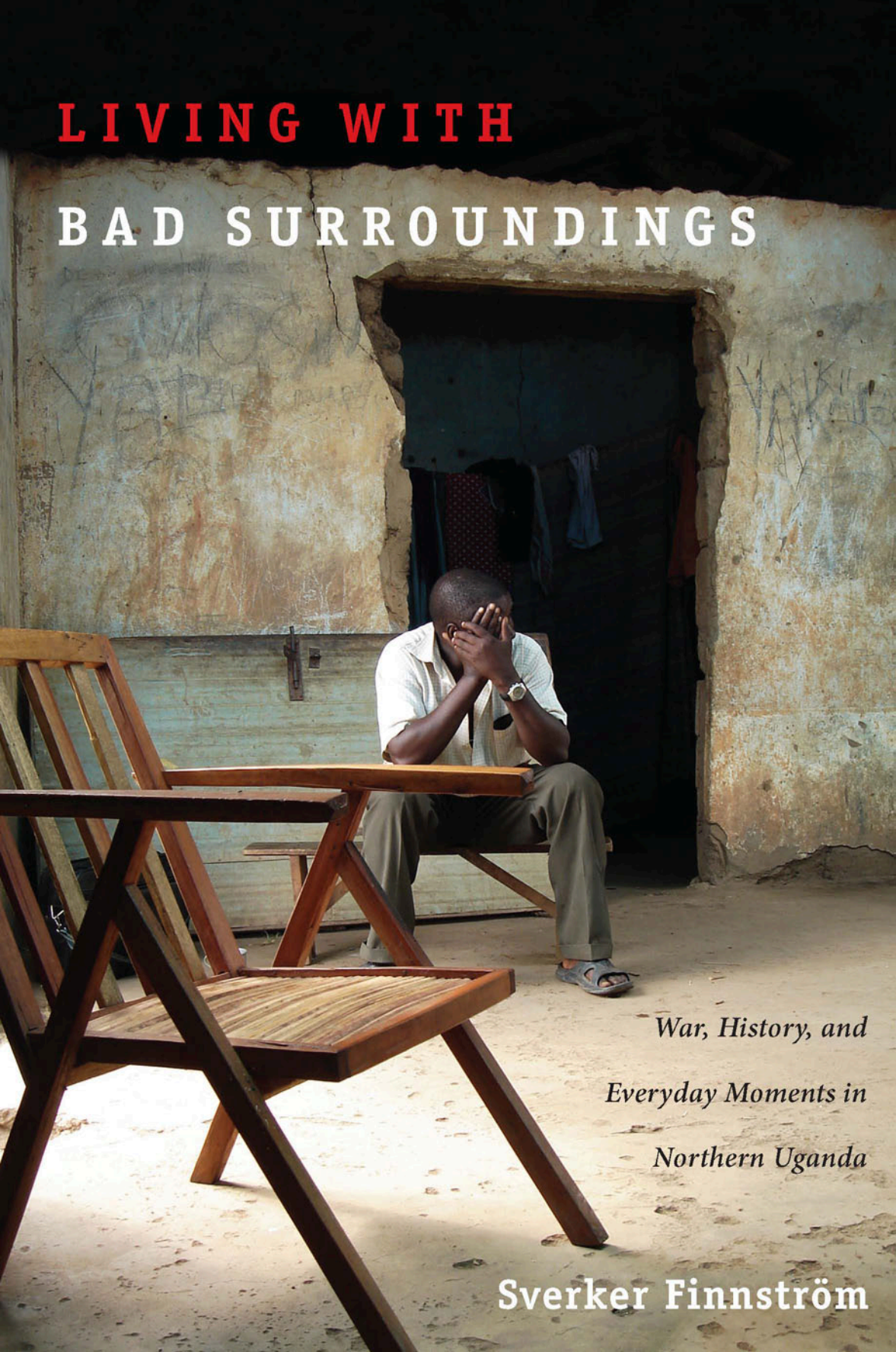
LIVING WITH BAD SURROUNDINGS



War, History, and Everyday Moments in Northern Uganda

Sverker Finnström

LIVING WITH BAD SURROUNDINGS

The Cultures and Practice of Violence Series

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The study of violence has often focused on the political and economic conditions under which violence is generated, the suffering of victims, and the psychology of its interpersonal dynamics. Less familiar are the role of perpetrators, their motivations, and the social conditions under which they are able to operate. In the context of postcolonial state building and more latterly the collapse and implosion of society, community violence, state repression, and the phenomena of judicial inquiries in the aftermath of civil conflict, there is a need to better comprehend the role of those who actually do the work of violence—torturers, assassins, and terrorists—as much as the role of those who suffer its consequences.

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LIVING WITH BAD SURROUNDINGS

War, History, and Everyday Moments in Northern Uganda

Sverker Finnström

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Huts will be rebuilt, and compounds cleared
And the mango trees will blossom with fruits . . .

CAROLINE LAMWAKA, IN MEMORIAM

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"An anthropologist has usually called on the assistance, imposed on the patience, and trespassed on the hospitality of many by the time his work reaches print, and the least he can do," notes Dyson-Hudson (1966: ix) in his classic on the pastoralist politics of northeastern Uganda, "is to make some acknowledgement of the fact."

I, too, am indebted to so many people, first and foremost my family. They are now deeply involved with Uganda and my research efforts, to me an illustration of the true nature of anthropology; that is, to bring worlds together. My parents, Kerstin and Orvar Finnström, visited me in Uganda. And together with my siblings with families—Åsa, Leif, Sara, Hanna, Torkel, Birgitta, and Fabian—they have wholeheartedly welcomed Ugandan friends to Sweden. Most important and every day, Helena Edin gives me strength and peace, in Sweden, Uganda, and everywhere. Without her support and love this book would have been completely impossible.

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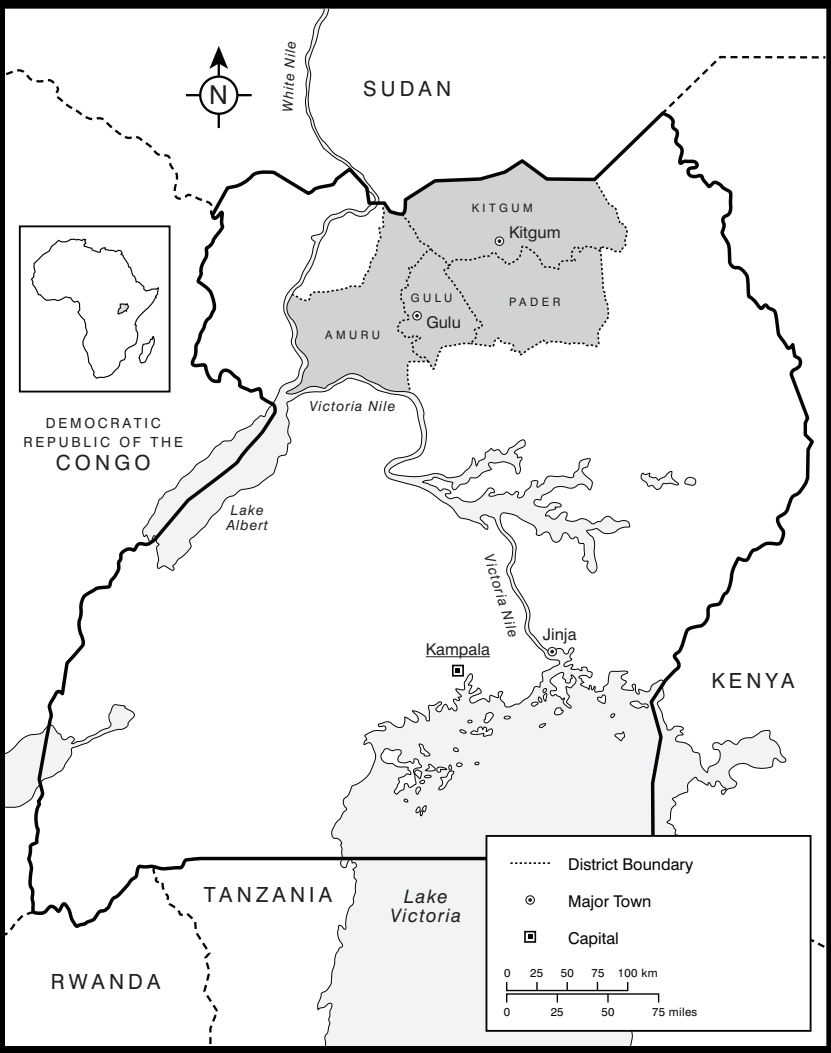
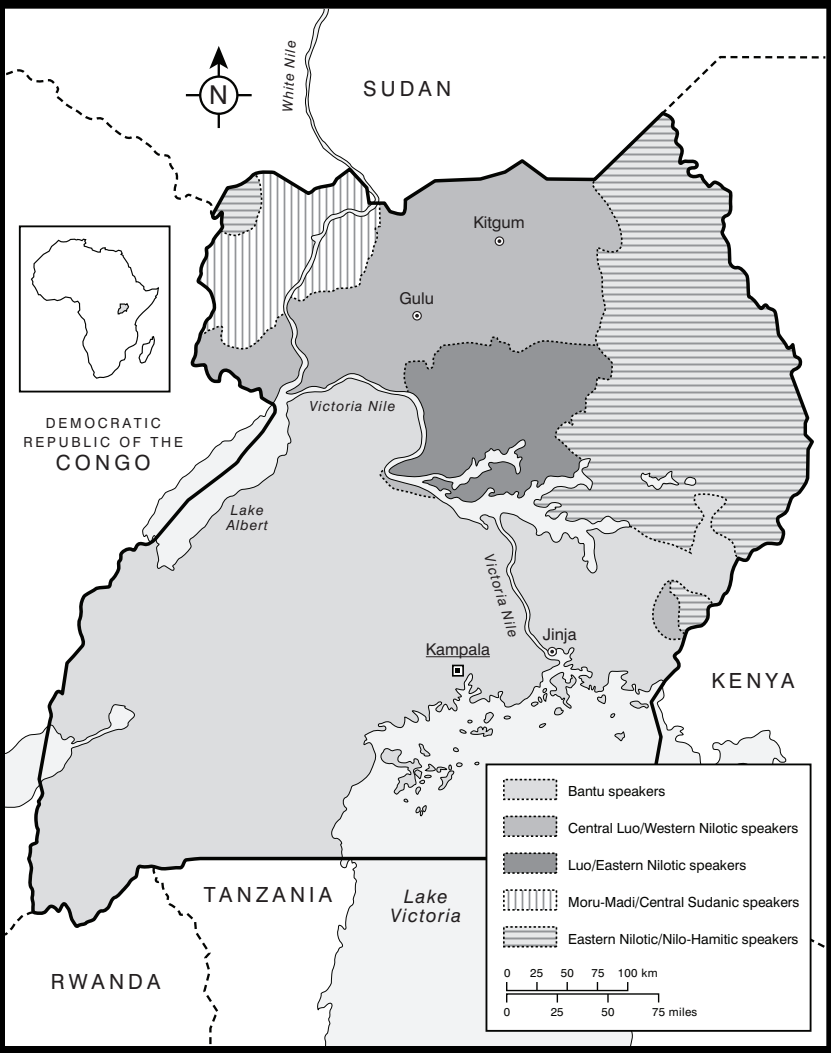
This book has grown out of a much rougher text, my Ph.D. dissertation (2003, Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis/Uppsala University). Also, it partly brings together, restructures, and updates arguments that have appeared in briefer versions elsewhere—in the journals *Critique of Anthropology*, *Anthropology Today*, *Africa*, and in the anthologies *No peace no war* and *Navigating youth, generating adulthood*. I am sincerely grateful to the publishers for the permission to revisit, rethink, and rework my texts. In doing so, Neil Whitehead's continual encouragement has been indispensable. Valerie Millholland, Miriam Angress, the reviewers, and everyone else at Duke have been equally important to me.

I alone am answerable for the stories, interpretations, and conclusions that follow. Still, I want to end with some final words of appreciation for those who contributed to this book. Whatever may be good about this work is due in large part to Helena, Tonny, Otim p'Ojok, Caroline, and all those friends and colleagues who shared their realities with me, inspired me, encouraged me, and patiently worked with me along the journey. Thank you, all.



MAP 1 Districts in northern Uganda (Acholiland). Prepared by Jonatan Alvarsson.



MAP 2 Ethnolinguistic groups in Uganda. Prepared by Jonatan Alvarsson.

Orientations

WAR AND CULTURE IN UGANDA

BOO IS BITTER

Potentially every culture is all cultures.

PAUL FEYERABEND

One night in July 2000, around two in the morning, some noise woke Atek Mary as she was sleeping with her husband and baby child in their hut on the outskirts of Pagak camp for internally displaced persons and uprooted families in Acholiland, northern Uganda. It was totally dark outside. The light of a torch flashed around, then fixed on her face, blinding her. She realized that somebody had opened the small window of the hut. It must have been opened by force, as it usually was locked from inside. Scared and confused by the sudden flashlight and the noise, she still noticed that her husband, Olwor Reuben, and their baby son, Tekkwor, were asleep. Mary could hear some murmuring voices, and then, somebody pounding on the door. In a forceful voice, she was ordered to open the door. She refused to answer or open. The voice from outside repeated the order, and she could now detect several voices. At least three men were standing outside the hut.

Mary managed to wake her husband, only to hear again the agitated voices from outside demanding to have the door opened. Again, the harsh light from the torch flashed at them. Mary and

Reuben kept quiet and decided to refuse to open the door. Then the people outside threatened to throw a bomb into the window of the hut, if the door was not opened. The threat was repeated: "If you refuse now, we're going to hit you with a bomb!" Mary and Reuben again declined to answer the men outside, but they chose to raise an alarm, with the hope of alerting the soldiers in the nearby Ugandan army detachment. There was no response to the alarm. Then there was a sudden explosion. The blast threw Reuben against the back wall of the hut and threw both Mary and little Tekkwor aside. Mary and Reuben immediately lost consciousness.

After some time, impossible to know how long, Reuben regained consciousness. He realized that a grenade had gone off inside the hut. He felt a great pain, and his body was sticky with blood. One leg felt very heavy, and he could not turn around. Yet Reuben managed to crawl out of the hut, passing through the broken window, but he was weak and fell just outside. From there, he saw three men standing under the mango tree in the middle of the compound. Naked and confused, he escaped by crawling toward the nearby garden to hide.

Then the men must have disappeared as relatives rushed to the hut, alarmed by the heavy explosion. They broke down the door and found Mary, who was seriously injured. Tekkwor was also badly injured. However, the people could not find Reuben, and someone cried out, loudly, "Oh, they have killed Reuben." Hearing friendly voices announcing his alleged death, Reuben crawled with great pain back to the compound. The situation was assessed, and the injured were given some rudimentary first aid, but it was evident that they all needed to be transported to a hospital as soon as possible if they were to survive. In the meantime somebody managed to get a vehicle from Gulu town, and in the morning hours around seven o'clock Mary, Reuben, and Tekkwor were taken to St. Mary's Missionary Hospital just outside Gulu town. Their serious injuries forced them to remain in the hospital for several months.

In early December 2000, they were finally able to leave the hospital. Reuben still had splinters of metal in his body, and one of his legs was very seriously affected. He cannot walk long distances anymore, and he cannot dig in the gardens or do other heavy work. Both of Mary's legs were seriously injured, and one leg needed to be amputated. She is now walking with an artificial leg. Tekkwor had a big, nasty cut in the side of his body, around the hip, but besides the many scars and some shrapnel cuts, he seems to have survived without permanent internal injuries.

When the family returned to Pagak and the compound where Reuben's mother was still living, they received several threats from some young men. They also recalled a certain young man who had vaguely hinted a threat before the attack, that "something was about to happen." Reuben had been running a small business, and the men were expressing envy in a way that he felt was threatening. Reuben and Mary concluded that these young men belonged to the group who threw the bomb. Mary had even recognized the voice of one of the men during the attack, and thanks to her information, five men were arrested, though eventually released. It turned out that the men were *boo kec* bandits.

A security and juridical vacuum has followed the prolonged war in northern Uganda, and various bandits have seized the opportunity to harass, loot, and kill. *Boo* is a local spinach-like vegetable, while *kec* means bitter. The local epithet, then, indicates that boo kec bandits prefer to loot nice food such as meat at gunpoint, rather than to work in the gardens like honest people or live on poor man's food, that is, local vegetables. In Kitgum, east of Gulu, the same kind of wartime bandits are sometimes called *pit kumi*, "feeding the body."

Investigations proved that the boo kec bandits who tried to kill Reuben, Mary, and Tekkwor carried guns and grenades that were given to them by the commander of a Ugandan army detachment in another camp nearby. Some time before the violent attack on the family, seventy-five grenades had been found in the bush in a suspected rebel hideout. They were taken to Gulu town army barracks for registering, but some of them never reached the destination. Instead, a few grenades remained with the local army commander, and one was used in the attack on Reuben, Mary, and Tekkwor. When Reuben returned after his time at the hospital, there were persistent rumors that the bandits were still around, which increased Reuben's fear for his life. Reuben imagined that they wanted his money, which he had made in his small business, but he was also convinced that they wanted to kill him "straight away." In a similar night attack in a neighboring camp, a petty trader had been robbed and brutally killed. "Boo kec will always kill, because they do not want to be known," Reuben reasoned.

Boo kec and pit kumi are not rebels. Frequently they are connected with the Ugandan army, and many people in rural Acholiland fear bandits more than they fear rebels. "The rebels, at least, are open about their business, but if you encounter boo kec, never look them in the eyes," people frequently told me.

Reuben and Mary decided to move to the relative safety of Gulu town, leaving only Reuben's mother behind, as she refused to leave their rural place. After some serious discussions, Reuben and his friend Otim p'Ojok decided "not to push the case, since this would only invite more problems." The bandits were not charged, but could continue to harass people in the camp. The main suspect, however, left the area.

UNFINISHED REALITIES

This book explores the various ways Acholi people in northern Uganda struggle to establish control and balance in their daily lives in the midst of civil war, and how they construct meaning and understand the war as they live their humanity—always, however, in intersection with the wider global community. The Acholi homeland has been ravaged by war since 1986. The Uganda Peoples' Defence Forces (hereafter UPDF or the Ugandan army), commanded by General Yoweri Museveni, who is also the president of the country, is fighting the Lord's Resistance Army/Movement rebels.[1] Joseph Kony, a self-proclaimed general, fronts the Lord's Resistance Army/Movement, more commonly known simply as the Lord's Resistance Army (hereafter the LRA/M or simply the rebels).[2] In 2006, after several previous failures to find a settled solution, the semiautonomous government of Southern Sudan invited the fighting parties to new talks. In August the same year, the parties signed a historical but shaky cessation of hostilities agreement, mediated by the South Sudanese.

As guiding tools throughout the book, I will use the Acholi concepts of *piny marac* and *piny maber*, which I have chosen to translate as "bad surroundings" and "good surroundings" respectively. More specifically, *marac* refers to something that is very bad, *maber* to something good. *Piny* is usually translated by nouns like the "ground," "earth," "world," or more broadly the "surroundings of everyday life." *Piny* is part of the wider landscape; and landscape means existence, Cohen and Odhiambo (1989: 9) write. An old-time anthropologist like Evans-Pritchard (1965: 210) translated *piny* as "tribe," while Cohen and Odhiambo (1989: 31–35) elaborate and describe *piny* using terms like territory, people, country, and nation; for some people today it carries even the connotation of a "global motherland." As an adverb, *piny* indicates that something is on the ground (Savage 1955). This can be related to *ru-piny*, the word for dawn, "when the sun breaks through and drives away the cover of darkness and night," as p'Bitek (1971: 155) notes. Yet the daytime is also the period when

humans face daily risks and sufferings as they expose themselves to their adversaries, and the ideal night, p'Bitek holds, is the time for rest and peace. "Even nature is at rest," p'Bitek (1971: 155) writes, adding that only antisocial beings such as witches are at work. In war-torn Uganda night is indeed ambivalent. The rebels, for example, most often attack during the dark hours, as did the bandits who assaulted Reuben, Mary, and Tekkwor.

An example may illustrate my orientations. Former rebel fighters testified to me that the rebel command sometimes claims that it wants to establish a new moral order, with the objective of breaking with the violent postcolonial history of Uganda (see also Behrend 1998a; 1999b). From the rebels' perspective, I suggest, the claim to a new moral order provides them with the legitimacy to abduct children to their ranks. The children, cynically speaking, are suitable targets to be initiated into this new order. The claim has also provided the rebels with the motivation to mutilate or even kill people, notably old men and women, who practice ancestral worship or otherwise promote the existing Acholi cosmological order.

Arthur, a former rebel religious functionary or a so-called controller, told me about the strategy of the early 1990s, when he was with the rebels. He was then about eighteen years old. At one point, Arthur had been engaged in destroying ancestor shrines in the Koch area, south of Gulu town. Elders and spirit mediums were also killed. However, some of the shrines in the area were so powerful, Arthur told me, that it was almost impossible to burn them down. In one case, his rebel unit tried for three days, but they finally sent for Joseph Kony, the rebel leader, who came and set the shrines on fire. "It was easily done for him," Arthur said about Kony. "He is a man with the spirit. He has it." Today many rural people have let the shrines fall into neglect and decay. Shrines were allowed to become dilapidated also in peacetime, eventually to be put in order when they were needed, notably when sacrifices were to be made (Malandra 1939). In these days of war and great unrest, however, people sometimes even actively destroy the shrines in an effort to avoid rebel reprisals. Others allow the bush to grow over and hide the shrines. On an existential level, I suggest, people in the war-torn region experience a lessened control over ontological security in everyday life (see Giddens 1991; Jackson 1998), and to destroy or hide the shrines is an immediate response to the difficult situation.

I also encountered efforts to resist the rebels' violent pattern of destruction. Ladit Abic and his family used to live in Patiko-Bongatira, a few miles outside

Gulu town (in Acholi, *ladit*, plural: *ludito*, is the address of respect given to elderly men, or men who are senior to you). Both rebels and Ugandan army personnel tend to frequent and pass through the area. In March 1995, the rebels abducted one son of the family. A second son was abducted in April 1998. So far, only the second son has returned. He escaped from the rebels in February 2000 but did not return to the family in Patiko-Bongatira, as he feared being abducted again. According to unconfirmed information that Abic has gathered, his other son is still alive, by now fully integrated into the rebel movement. This son was once wounded in battle but recovered, a person told Abic. Some persistent rumors, however, say that he died in battle.

The family's compound was a wonder of normality. I noted that the ancestral shrine was prominent in the compound, and indeed well kept, like the rest of the compound. A central feature of the shrine was a grinding stone, so much used over the years that it had a big hole in it. The stone, Abic told me, "represented the first granny of the clan." The compound also housed supplementary shrines for spirits not specific to the clan, but that have been erected when problems in everyday life, notably illness and health problems, are coped with. Impressed with the neat compound, which extended both in space and time, including both living and dead, I asked Abic if he did not fear that the rebels would disturb him. "That one, we leave it to God," he answered calmly. "In this world, everything is up to God."

To interpret Abic's stand as fatalistic misses an important point. Rather, as I will elaborate in this book, his stand can be understood in terms of lived and existential realism. "Realism," as the philosopher Merleau-Ponty (1964a: 32) has cautioned us, is a term perhaps too burdened under the yoke of various philosophical doctrines, but my only intention is to acknowledge, as Abic does when he reflects upon his predicament in life, that we are always tied to history and the wider world. For Abic and his family, in the context of war and increasing violence, which were seemingly senseless developments, it was most meaningful to keep the relationship with the spiritual and greater world active. To actively attend to these relations, which I suggest is about orientation in life, exemplifies the existential effort to cope with the difficult situation, ultimately in order to be able to govern it. Culturally, socially, and bodily informed practices, inescapably entangled, are the main means through which war and its effects are interpreted and acted upon, something that sustains the experience of war, making it and its multiple forms of violence routines among other

routines in everyday life (e.g., Kleinman 2000). Parallel to this, however, informants expressed distress about the fixation of meaning to a limited set of cultural and ethnic stereotypes that propaganda of war and chauvinistic politics impose upon the local social realities and the national order of things.

This book paints a broad but specific ethnographical, sociopolitical, and historical background to the existential struggles of today in Acholiland. I will balance my reading of the literature on Uganda, in the first place, against my informants' stories of a colonial past followed by a postcolonial debacle with interrelated wars, and, following that, against their stories of politics, propaganda, and pragmatics of war, and the fact of their internal mass displacement. This is the organizational progress of the book, chapter by chapter, which I continue by investigating the role of rumors, religion, morality, and cosmology in times of war. Cosmology I want to define as everyday but infinite surroundings. With this broad focus, it will not be possible for me to present any conclusive or final answers to the questions that my study raises. This is partly a consequence of my understanding of culture as both a resource and a constraint in human activities. It is situational, neither total nor final, and more about existential orientation than anything else, and activated by "the drive to experience the world as meaningful," the most prominent of human universals (Hornborg 2001: 237). This is nothing new or original; rather, my stance adheres to the current and widespread anthropological understanding of culture. As Merleau-Ponty (1962: xix) puts it in his investigation of what he calls the existential structures, "Because we are in the world, we are *condemned to meaning*, and we cannot do or say anything without its acquiring a name in history."

The word "meaningful," as I want to use it, when applied to people's experience of the world, simply indicates that a phenomenon is situational and can be made comprehensible and comparable with other phenomena, and that people who live together articulate and mediate experiences and stories among one another in a patterning and systematic manner (Århem 1994: 19–24). To find common ground is a principal concern in cultural life everywhere in the world. One voice finds recognition in other voices, to paraphrase Das and Kleinman (2001: 5). This is not to say that the meaning is once and for all given. However, as illustrated by Ladit Abic's account, to keep the ancestral shrines in order in the midst of war can be a most meaningful activity. When I met him in 2006, he had finally left Patiko-Bongatira. The

Ugandan army appeared on almost a weekly basis to harass him and rob the few resources he and his wives had tried to raise, which made life next to impossible. "The surroundings are bad," as my Acholi friends so often phrased it. With this in mind, a general and complementary aim of this book is to stimulate understandings that acknowledge the great lived everyday complexity of a war zone, a complexity that nevertheless tends to be obscured by the black-and-white propaganda that war and armed conflict produce.

THE GROWING MILLET UNDER THE AFRICAN SUN

History, belonging, and politics are all issues of contention. It is indeed difficult to write about and intellectualize bitter conflicts. The causes and consequences of the war in northern Uganda, the reasons for it, and facts about it—they all differ, depending on whom you are listening to. There is no one version that is fully agreed upon by all parties involved. Perhaps this is a truism to many readers, but it is still important to emphasize because contemporary conflict analyses often tend to emphasize single causes for war in ways that are reductionist. Regarding war in Africa, ethnicity is most often invoked as one such single cause. Consequently, African realities are reduced to little more than the antithesis to the order of Western civilization, which on the other hand is taken for granted as modern and civilized (Allen 1999; Richards 1996). An otherwise well-researched report of the plight of young people in war-torn Acholiland is illustrative, in its sketchy description of the cause or even root of the conflict: "The current conflict in northern Uganda has its roots in ethnic mistrust between the Acholi people and the ethnic groups of central and southern Uganda as well as in the religious and spiritual beliefs of the Acholi people and the manipulation of these beliefs" (Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children 2001: 81). The quotation mentions aspects that play a role in the conflict but are not necessarily its roots or even central cause. This reductionist image of the war and its causes, only too common in the understanding of conflicts in Africa, must be taken with great caution.

In most wars, propaganda and harsh words almost completely close the avenues of dialogue and mutual understanding. Turmoil and mistrust prevail, and almost every matter, even the more conventional aspects of anthropological research, can become very sensitive. During some periods, the rebels keep a low profile and their attacks are few, and consequently the Ugandan authorities relax, being cooperative and friendly even to the outside researcher. Dur-

ing other periods, the rebels are very active, and in the Ugandan counterinsurgency practices almost everyone can be regarded as an enemy collaborator, including the researcher. Sometimes the rebels create havoc; killings, rapes of women, and other forms of wanton violence have been rampant. Over the years, several thousands of children have been abducted and forced to join rebel ranks (see, e.g., Amnesty International 1997; 1999; Human Rights Watch 1997; 2003a).[3]

The war is indeed a global war even if fought on local grounds. For some two decades, it has rolled back and forth, like the changes from rainy season to dry season and back to rainy season. The massive influx of international humanitarian aid has ended up being deeply entangled with the realities on the ground. The U.S. government included the LRA/M on its post-9/11 list of global terrorist groups when the Ugandan government joined the global war on terror. Rebel leader Joseph Kony and four other commanders, one of whom has since died in action, are wanted by the International Criminal Court in The Hague.

During some periods the rebels are disciplined and seek local support, more like fish in the water, to recall Mao Zedong's famous dictum on the guerrilla fighters' absolute need of local support to survive. In such periods, the repressive measures of the Ugandan authorities increase (e.g., Human Rights Watch 1999). In January 2003, the magistrate's court in Gulu town reported that two boys aged fourteen and sixteen who returned home from rebel captivity were charged with treason, and that twenty-five more minors were being held in military custody without charges, under pressure to join the Ugandan army or face treason charges (Gulu Archdiocese 2003a; Human Rights Watch 2003b). The justice system became one of the first institutions to suffer from the war, and most cases of rebel as well as Ugandan military abuse of the civil population have not been addressed (African Rights 2000).

Against this background, it has been necessary for me sometimes to change dates and the names of places and people in order not to disclose my informants' identities. At times, other details are altered as well. Sadly, the situation does not allow me to acknowledge properly the great input of my interlocutors and coworkers in the field. The reader will note that I frequently refer to statements of rather anonymous "informants," something that is necessary in the effort to protect their identities. However, when Ugandan friends read some of my texts that I brought back to them, many soon located their stories

in the texts, sometimes nodded in agreement with my interpretations, and even revised or elaborated upon them. In such moments anthropology felt like just the right thing to be doing. Where I had used pseudonyms, some insisted on having their real names and real places given in my writings, which they claimed gave authenticity to the stories in the book. As my Ugandan friend and coworker Anthony (Tonny) Odiya Labol argued with reference to an Acholi proverb, "The growing millet does not fear the sun" (*bel ka otwi pe lworo ceng*). More often than anthropologists tend to admit, informants want to be remembered for what they have said and contributed. Any secret agent will be disappointed, however, as this book does not present anything that is not common knowledge among most people in northern Uganda. Disclosing new information has not been my ambition. Anthropology, as I have chosen to practice it, is about painstakingly investigating and analyzing the common, general, mainstream, and even taken-for-granted stuff of everyday life in a particular context, rather than the seemingly subversive and revolutionary.

THINK ABOUT TOMORROW

In war-torn Acholiland, young men and women, whose situation was the main focus in my investigations, struggle to find balance in life, "a sense of agency in the face of disempowering circumstances" (Jackson 2002b: 15). Indeed, young people (and, of course, other people) live under conditions that they frequently described as "bad surroundings" (*piny marac*). This is true when armed fighting is intense, but it is also true in periods of lull, when the war, at least on the surface, seems to be far away. The attack on Reuben, Mary, and Tekkwor happened during a period of lull in the fighting. Maybe it was a period of no war, but certainly it was not a period of peace. At the same time, I was repeatedly struck by the younger generation's unconditional struggle for a comprehensible life in the midst of war and displacement. As these young people aimed to establish themselves as adult individuals in Uganda, they also struggled for some measure of security in their lives. Ultimately, on a larger, collective scale, they struggled for "good surroundings" (*piny maber*), for individual lives in balance with the greater scheme of things, persons, relatives, ancestors, and God. The young Acholi did not passively wait for future solutions; rather, in everyday life they built for a future despite displacement and social unrest. Good surroundings, Acholi held, are not primarily to accumulate wealth or riches but rather to live under endurable conditions, in which

future wealth can be imagined, even planned for. Growing herds of cattle and young people who marry are the ultimate signs of good surroundings, older people would say. Democracy and the possibility of higher education is another, younger people would add.

It was my coworker Otim p'Ojok who introduced me to his clan brother and friend Reuben and his family in Pagak. As is the case with internal displacement all over Acholiland, the Pagak camp had grown rapidly around the local trading center, as the Ugandan army had forced rural people to assemble in camps, often at gunpoint. Reuben's connections to the land in Pagak, however, preceded the war. By the time of my visits, their home had become fully integrated into the surrounding displacement setting, and Reuben allowed some displaced people to stay on his private land. The family had managed to keep some agricultural areas just next to the house, making it an unusual compound in the many overcrowded camps in Acholiland. When I first visited the place, I immediately came to like it very much. It was a neat compound, centered on a family with their children and some elderly relatives. I encountered the typical Acholi hospitality in abundance, and I felt genuinely welcomed every time I came there. I made sure not to leave without arranging for my next visit.

Acholi say that the visitor brings satisfaction (*welo*, *kelo*, *yengo*) to the home—nice food that would otherwise have been kept for the future is prepared and shared. Maybe a chicken is slaughtered, or even a goat. Indeed, in Reuben's compound I was invited to share some of the nicest meals and discussions I ever had during my fieldwork. I was impressed by the young family's struggle for normality in midst of war. Reuben had raised by himself the wealth necessary to marry his two wives. Besides tilling the soil, he had started a small-scale business in the camp. On top of that, Reuben and a few friends in the camp had initiated a soccer club. The club had a wider agenda than just playing soccer. Rather, the football was the carrot in the recruitment of idle children to the club, which also practiced agriculture and promoted Acholi values. They had named their club Tam Pi Diki, "Think About Tomorrow."

DIRTY WAR AND BAD SURROUNDINGS

As I see it, the two concepts of good surroundings and bad surroundings are not absolute categories. Rather they represent quotidian moments along a lived and at times very uncertain continuum. Peaceful life can be infested with

conflicts and frustrations, but in the peaceful order of things, problems are handled, strategies beyond mere survival are developed, life is continuously constituted and reconstituted. Uncertainty is handled.

The alleged absence of war and military violence does not equal peace. Rather, as a man in Kitgum told me in late 1999, "The silence of guns does not mean peace." Illustratively, some few days after our meeting, war resumed after a relative lull of almost a year in the fighting, when rebels launched new attacks. Intermissions in fighting gave people some hope for the future, but this hope faded repeatedly each time fighting resumed. Continued stress and existential uncertainty about the near future were central aspects of everyday life.

The fact that fighting resumes repeatedly after shorter or longer periods without serious battles, confirmed my informants' claim that that the war has not come to a closure. Even when rebels withdraw to their bases in Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo, the fact that they have withdrawn to base is also a fact of war. As long as rebel leader Joseph Kony is somewhere with his fighters, so experience told my informants, one could never really tell what will happen next. The only thing one can know for sure is that war is not over. Sudden lulls over the years have given the population breathing space but no peace in life, and no peace of mind. When I arrived for fieldwork in mid-2002, I had been away from Uganda for exactly two years, during which the rebels had kept a very low profile. If we follow the statistics of the so-called battle-related deaths, there was no war during these two years. Again, it was during this period that the home of Reuben, Mary, and Tekkwor was attacked by bandits connected to the Ugandan army. Rather than an isolated incident, the attack must be read as an event; that is, as a story among many similar stories that, when listened to, unfolds a violent pattern of dirty war in the most mundane everyday life. Ladit Abic's flight from Patiko-Bongatira after so many years there was another such event.

During my fieldwork in 2005, the Ugandan army was declaring the war over. Only a "few mopping-up operations" remained. They had said so many times before, but this time most foreign diplomats and Western observers bought into the government's description of the state of affairs. At the same time, the mortality rate in the camps reached unprecedented levels. About one thousand Ugandans died every week, the overwhelming majority of curable diseases and malnutrition (World Health Organization et al. 2005). Battle-

related statistics can only be tentative, as it is almost impossible to establish battle-related or combat-related casualty rates (Allen 1999). Even more, what exactly is a battle-related death? As it often is in civil wars today, the majority of people will not die in direct military violence, but as a result of malnutrition and illness and in the aftermath of uprooting, displacement, and forced camp life (James 1996).

In questioning the commonly made distinction between low-intensity and high-intensity wars, Munck and de Silva (2000) label today's wars "postmodern insurgencies." Kaldor (1999a) writes about "new wars." Nordstrom (1992) calls them "dirty wars." I will follow Nordstrom, because to me "dirty war" sounds less detached, less academic, more close to the lived realities. In dirty wars, Nordstrom writes, "both states and guerrilla forces use the construction of terror and the absurd as a mechanism for gaining or maintaining sociopolitical control over a population." In such a warfare strategy, "civilians, rather than soldiers, are the tactical targets, and fear, brutality, and murder are the foundation on which control is constructed" (Nordstrom 1992: 261). She has also called this kind of war "terror warfare," which "focuses less on killing the physical body than on terrifying the population as a whole into, the military strategists hope, cowed acquiescence. Strategic murder, torture, community destruction, sexual abuse, and starvation become the prime weapons in the arsenal of terror warfare" (Nordstrom 2002: 275–276). The war is without any clear distinctions between combatants and noncombatants or easily defined frontlines (see also Fukui and Markakis 1994: 3; Munck 2000).

Without conclusively defining war or even peace, I hold that the Acholi have been living with war since 1986. War and "negative peace," the latter here understood as the temporary absence of acts of violence, are essentially the same. They form variables along a lived continuum. Acholi informants frequently said that they were living with "bad surroundings" (piny marac). The alternative, "good surroundings" (piny maber), is when "hunting will be successful, evil spirits will be deterred from entering their villages, sickness may be unknown among the inhabitants, women may not be barren, their children will enjoy health and happiness and their crops will be abundant," as the missionary Malandra (1939: 27) wrote, from a position influenced by the colonial effort of pacification. However, good surroundings are neither an absolute opposite to bad surroundings nor the glorious tradition of static harmony, long and forever lost. The late anthropologist and poet Okot p'Bitek

nuances the colonial imagination of static and uncontested harmony among the Acholi, and of the bad as the essential opposite to the good. Good surroundings, he writes, are "when things are normal, the society thriving, *facing and overcoming crises*" (p'Bitek 1986: 27, emphasis added).

Following p'Bitek the poet, rather than Malandra the missionary, the idea of bad and good as ends along a lived continuum captures my informants' imagination and conceptualization of a good life, but still as imagined under living conditions best described as bad. Even if the surroundings are good, bad things will happen, and they have to be handled. Equally, in war, too, people face and overcome crises in everyday life. Yet even for those who cope, resist or join the conflict in one way or the other, the wider surroundings remain seriously bad. Again to quote p'Bitek (1986: 27), bad surroundings speak to the fact that "the whole thing is out of hand, that the entire apparatus of the culture cannot cope with the menace any more." In other words, the violent conflict is beyond immediate control. Sickness is abundant, children are malnourished, cattle are gone, crops fail, bad spirits roam the surroundings, and people are killed or die at an early age and in large numbers.

CONTROL AND BALANCE IN EVERYDAY LIFE

Life does go on in the midst of war. The description of the situation as one primarily of bad surroundings should not be interpreted as if the local population or its culture is doomed to ruin. Rather, as Jackson finds in his existential-phenomenological anthropology, there is still some use for the terms "control" and "balance." "Control," Jackson (1998: 18) writes, "connotes governance and adjustment between self and other rather than the maintenance of a fixed line, the imposition of one person's will, or the establishment of a rigid order. As such it involves both self-reflection *and* dialogue. It is a matter of balancing, of dynamic equilibrium." As Jackson suggests, control involves an existential search for balance in everyday life. He continues, "But by *balance* I do not mean static equilibrium, harmony, or homeostasis. I mean to imply an ongoing dialectic in which persons vie and strategize in order to avoid nullification as well as to achieve some sense of governing their own fate" (Jackson 1998: 18–19). When the surroundings are good, crises and problems of everyday life can be overcome.

Some time after returning to Sweden after my second period of fieldwork in 1999–2000, I received the sad news from Gulu about the attack on Reuben,

Mary, and Tekkwor. "The incident has demoralised us very much," my friend Otim p'Ojok concluded in the faxed message that waited for me at the Department of Anthropology in Uppsala one morning when I arrived for work.

Their struggle continued. After some months in the hospital, the family decided to leave Pagak camp for Gulu town, to leave death threats for the relative security of an urban milieu. In January 2002, a new letter informed me that Otim p'Ojok and Reuben had started a small-scale but rather successful business in Gulu town. Some savings and the profit from the shop paid the hospital bills and continued to assist them in supporting their families. I cannot help recalling the name that these young men had once given the soccer club in Pagak camp. The soccer club could no longer function, but its name, "Think About Tomorrow," as I found out when I arrived in Uganda later on in 2002, was painted on the signpost of their small-scale town business. Sometimes, when a male customer in the store ended up buying only beers or the locally distilled liquor, these friendly shopkeepers would simply refuse to sell more alcohol and instead suggest that their customer save some money for soap and other necessities that the customer's family would need. Think about tomorrow, they carefully told their drunken customers.

BARRIERS AND BRIDGES

In essence, if there is such a thing, I am a European, non-African, or rather a foreigner, even a stranger, to Acholiland. *Muno*, as Acholi say. Obviously, my looks resembled those of the expatriate relief and aid workers, development volunteers on short-term or long-term assignments, or the journalists and foreign ambassadors who briefly visit war-torn Acholiland. In practice, I did my best to acknowledge the hospitality offered by my informants. I always ate their food, drank their water, wine, and beers. *Lawake*, Acholi call persons who do the opposite with a proud and bossy attitude. "Like a *muno* [foreigner] who refuses to eat what is offered; who doesn't mingle with locals," as an old man explained. I participated in my informants' reconciliation and cleansing rituals, and I went to their baptisms and funerals. I constantly and eagerly listened to my informants' stories. I especially remember one senior ex-rebel who talked without a single break for more than five hours, as I was seated in an uncomfortable chair doing my best to write down everything he was saying. It was totally fascinating, but my buttocks and my back ached and my writing arm was cramping when we finally decided to call it a day.

Fieldwork was divided into five phases. I arrived for the first time in 1997 and stayed for about three months. Then I came back for seven months of fieldwork in 1999. In March 2000, my parents, Kerstin and Orvar Finnström, visited me in the field for two intense weeks. It was a great experience for my parents and me, as well as for my Acholi friends. I returned to Uganda in 2002 for two more months. This time I traveled together with my fiancée, Helena Edin, who, just like my parents, has taken a keen interest in my strange choice to extend my academic career to a faraway and troubled place in Africa. In 2004, Tonny visited my family in Sweden as we continued our research, now far from the immediate realities in Uganda. Since then I have returned to Uganda in 2005 and 2006; in 2005 Helena joined me for my third Christmas in Gulu. In 2006, Otim p'Ojok visited Sweden. We toured Sweden as we visited friends and family, but we also revisited our Ugandan research material. It is good to have been able to share my Ugandan encounters with my family, and Swedish realities with two of my best Ugandan friends. Indeed, my family is now extended over continents and imagined borders, and I value the friendships that have been built up between Uganda and Sweden.

I remain, however, an outsider, a visitor, to Acholiland. I cannot claim any essential connection to Uganda. Abu-Lughod notes that her status as a "halfie" (of Palestinian origin on the paternal side, but raised in the United States; see Abu-Lughod 1986; 1993: 39) or "insider" (Abu-Lughod 1989: 270) was both a door opener and a constraint in her fieldwork among Bedouins in Egypt. She has written two finely tuned and most insightful ethnographies that have been of great inspiration to me. She acknowledges that ethnographic accounts written by insiders must be subjected to the same kind of scrutiny as those written by outsiders (Abu-Lughod 1989: 270). Yet on a theoretical and general level, I remain not fully convinced of the insider or halfie claim of methodological superiority, or about the promotion of anthropology "at home" in such terms, which is now and then emphasized in the project of legitimating anthropology in a postcolonial world (e.g., Sichone 2001). At the end of the day, regardless of our respective backgrounds, it is ethnographic fieldwork that puts anthropology on firm empirical ground.

FIELDWORK ENGAGEMENT

Engagement rather than simple empathy has guided me in the encounters with my interlocutors in Uganda. I hold that the divergent experiences of the