

A MODERN WITCH-HUNT AMONG THE LANGO OF UGANDA*

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The material presented in this paper was collected in 1967 while I was carrying out research in Labwor, Northern Uganda. It concerns events which took place at that time in the neighbouring area of Lango District, the home region of President Obote. For a variety of reasons, I did not investigate these events in great detail and my information on them is incomplete in a number of important respects. At the time, I was anxious to complete my own work in Labwor and I was also aware that I could easily put this work and indeed myself, at serious risk if I began to take too clear and direct an interest in a potentially explosive issue in a District for which I did not have official Uganda Government research clearance. It is moreover quite unlikely that such clearance could have been obtained. In spite of the thinness of my data, I have thought it worthwhile to present it here for two main sets of reasons. Firstly Audrey Richards, to whose memory this volume is dedicated, was herself one of the very first anthropologists to document and analyse an African witch-finding movement (Richards, 1935); and she had additionally a strong and lasting interest in Uganda. Secondly, although the events which I discuss here were the subject of letters to and articles in newspapers, they have never to my knowledge been the subject of an academic publication. Perhaps it is not too much to hope that my, albeit fragmentary, discussion of them here may tempt someone to embark on a more detailed study of them in the future. It is rather ironic in this regard that one of the more recent studies of the Lango (Curley, 1973) explicitly eschews discussion of witchcraft and sorcery on the grounds that they are not of great significance in that area. Curley's fieldwork was completed only a few months before the movement in question broke out, and he had clearly not kept in close touch with subsequent events. More generally his unfortunate comment is potentially a lesson for us all about the limitations of intensive synchronic study. . Certainly one sees the need in such a context for the sort of gifted

... insights which Audrey Richards herself possessed to such an extraordinary degree.

II

My own attention was first drawn to the movement in September 1967 by two of my neighbours in the southern Labwor village of Katabok. After discussing some of the ways in which witches could harm people and crops, one of them said that he had heard that local government askaris (militia) in Lango could be ordered by chiefs to beat and lock up witches without trial. He and his companion seemed to think this was a good thing. When I asked them if bad mistakes could not be made for instance if a person was accused out of jealousy - they denied this. According to them it became clear over time that a person was a witch (ajwok or lajok).

The next day I talked to a local headman about the matter. He thought cases would be handed over by headmen to the chief and that people would be beaten and locked up without formal trial if their cases were clear cut. He understood that there was to be a special detention centre for witches who had been convicted in court and served their sentences. He and my field assistant thought that all this was a good idea which could help to stamp out witchcraft. Indeed, a number of people told me that they hoped that the system would come soon to Labwor. In line with some of the newspaper reports (see below), they said that it was a government-approved scheme which was due to move to other areas such as Teso and Labwor once Lango witches had been dealt with. In Labwor, they said, little happened at the moment if a person was suspected of witchcraft. A village level enquiry could be held, and the accused's antecedents would be discussed since witchcraft propensities were thought to be hereditary. But a suspected witch would be simply warned to stop and no referral to the local government authorities was made.

By the time that such discussions took place, a report on the events in Lango had already been printed in a Luo-language newspaper, and this was probably, at least indirectly, one of the sources of information available to Labwor villagers at the time. Other reports were also reaching them from relatives who lived in Lango and from people who had visited or travelled through the District.

The newspaper report to which I have referred appeared on page six of a paper called Dwon Lwak (Voice of the People) in the issue of July 4th 1967. The newspaper was published by the Ministry of Information, but I am not sure what, if anything, this means in terms of high level government complicity or orchestration" in the development. The report was surrounded by a fancy border which made it stand out to the eye and it had a headline in large capital letters, and ending with an exclamation mark, announcing that the seizure of witches had begun in Lango. It then went on to say that Dwon Lwak had received information in the form of a letter from John Stephen Oryang of Okwor Trading Centre, Ayer, that the seizure of those thought by the authorities to be witches was "ablaze" in that area. Mr. Oryang's letter was then quoted. He writes that he is extremely pleased about what is being done in the areas of Bala, Ayer, Cegere and some others. Throughout the country witches are beginning to be seized. If it is heard that you are a witch, your name is written secretly and you are suddenly seized and taken to the sub-chief (jago). There you are expected to confess that you are a witch. If you conceal it, you are beaten until you confess. This has resulted in great trouble for old women because of their acts of witchcraft.

The writer then lists different types of witchcraft and witches involved in the seizures. These include poisoning (wallo), the spoiling of childbirth (ading) (cf. Driberg, 1923:241-2), destruction of crops, night-dancers, people who drop medicines on people's feet (so causing elephantiasis according to a Labwor informant), attacking someone's testicles, and the evil eye.

He goes on to note that the campaign is in full force in the part of the area called "Lango Central". Some people have been caught with evil medicines. One had transformed a goat into a female lover. Many witches who have been seized are being kept under confinement to await trial in the courts. Some witches in the area have fled when they have heard what is happening, and have left others to eat the crops ripening in their fields. Witches who have been seized, he writes, are made to sit with naked buttocks on barbed wire or to walk on it barefoot. They have to dig up termite mounds and they are beaten. This has caused many people to confess to their witchcraft before large crowds of people. The writer concludes with an invitation to anyone who doubts his words to come and see for themselves.

My own information was supplemented early that October by a

report from my field assistant's classificatory cousin who was living in Lango. Confirming that many witches had fled, he said that these included three district councillors and nine schoolteachers. He said that witches who refused to confess were beaten, and also forced to do various things. In this context he listed kicking balls of barbed wire, carrying heavy stones, picking up hot stones, washing one's face in water in which pepper had been mixed, and drinking urine which the victims were told was "your beer".

In discussing this report, I once again raised the question of jealousy, particularly with regard to councillors and teachers, but my neighbours disagreed. Where jealousy came into it, they said, was on the part of these witches who had killed people in order to gain their present positions. I was told that enquiries are made among their clansfolk before people are arrested. I was also told that the arrests had the approval of the government and the missions, and that President Obote was to come to Lango to address people on the subject. One man told me that the programme had been started by the District Council there. I may add that when I mentioned the affair to the local Verona Father in Labwor he simply commented that there was a great deal of poisoning in Lango as compared with Labwor.

By mid-November news of the campaign began to reach the national press. On November 17th, the English language newspaper Uganda Argus published a letter of protest about the campaign from a Mr. Okello of Dokolo in Lango. He describes how people get together to write down the names of those they believe to be witches. Searches are carried out, beatings are administered and the captives are taken to the local chief to confess. People are fleeing their homes, he writes, and he mentions the case of an unidentified teacher as an example. He appeals finally to Local and Central Government to bring the movement to an end.

Mr. Okello's letter stimulated a reply from Mr. Roy Alwongoa in the December 1st issue of the Argus. He vigorously defends the campaign and he discusses the case of the teacher, which he seems to know about, in some detail. The punishment of witches is not new in Lango, he notes, and it should not be stopped.

Much fuller and more negative coverage of the campaign, however, appeared in another English language paper. The People, which was incidentally a Government-supporting newspaper. On November 25th, one

half of page four was devoted to the story (the other half was filled with an advertisement for Pan Am flights to New York). The article, written by "a staff reporter", was headed "Anti-sorcery Campaign Sweeps Lango", and above this was the line "I made ex-lover impotent' admits woman". The reporter had "visited the area recently". Many Lango, he says, are claiming that their campaign against sorcerers is their contribution to the Five Year Development Plan. "We want a five year anti-sorcery plan" he was told. He notes that men and women who are suspected of sorcery are living in terror, because of the campaign. Such persons are rounded up and beaten into confession, and their houses are searched for suspicious goods. After confession they are taken to administrative headquarters to await trial. Local jails, he writes, have more sorcery prisoners than those accused of "conventional crimes". He himself saw sorcerers confess to their crimes in the magistrate's court at Amolatar but he notes that several people have also been acquitted when evidence was insufficient. The accused are said to sit with "their exhibits" of seized goods before them.

The writer reports that District officials are opposed to journalists going to see the actual campaign for themselves on the grounds that "publicity might give a false impression about the district to the outside world". Stories of sorcery and punishment of sorcery suspects are, however, known all over the world, he writes, and he mentions a West German case of some years earlier.

After discussing different forms of Lango wizardry, the reporter adds that it is claimed that "free communication among tribes" has enabled people to purchase more deadly forms of witchcraft than those traditional to the area. Some of the targets of the campaign are known men of wealth, he writes, who are as such believed capable of buying the most deadly techniques. Finally he notes that he was told that police and the local administration "are not necessarily opposed" to the campaign but give advice about the treatment of suspects, and some people have even been arrested for alleged brutality to suspects.

The hints in this article that what was going on in Lango could become embarrassing received corroboration the following week. On page five of the December 2nd issue of the same newspaper, Mr. J. Otima of Makerere College "replied", as the paper put it, to the previous week's article. His own piece was headed "Government should stop this

'inhuman tyranny". He begins by admitting that there are sorcerers in Lango and they should be punished. He also accepts that the campaign started off well because "the accused sorcerers were .really found with evidence on them". But, he claims, the situation has deteriorated. Personal grudges are involved, proper investigations are not made, people are beaten and tortured into submission. He writes that he is ashamed that the Central Government is aware of the brutality and encourages it by its silence. The treatment meted out, he says, is what might have been found in Leopold's old Congo or in slave trade days. The "anti-sorcery plan" is working directly against the objectives of the Five Year Economic Plan. The accusations against men of wealth are jealously directed against the economically progressive, while people long known to be sorcerers are left in peace. Journalists should be allowed to see the campaign. in action if it is really a good thing. Lango should not be allowed to fall into anarchy, and "lawyers, judges and humanitarians" should help to bring the uncontrolled arrests to an end. As far as I can tell, the Lango campaign did in fact peter out not long afterwards, and it did not spread, as had been forecast, into neighbouring areas.

III

The above material is all that I could gather on the movement, and there are clearly many major gaps in the picture which emerges. Details of accusers and accused are largely lacking, and it is by no means certain what motives lay behind the various accusations. The fact that the campaign began in Lango which was the President' s home area, and hints of early governmental acquiescence in, and possibly even encouragement of it led me at first to wonder whether it was masking some sort of political purge; and my suspicions of this were heightened when I learned that many teachers were in fear of accusation. The year 1967 was one of considerable dissatisfaction with the government for teachers. Their pay and working conditions were the subject of serious complaints by them, and their indignation on this issue was complemented by their anger at the Local Administrations Bill which the Government pushed through Parliament in September of that year. By this Bill, teachers were formally defined as public servants and so, ex officio,

were banned from political activity including membership of District Councils.

Notwithstanding my suspicions on this matter, Labwor friends and acquaintances, to whom I confided such thoughts, generally reacted negatively towards them, and they simply stressed the views on the justice of the campaign which I noted in my summary account. Not all such people, I should add, were government supporters, and their opinions lead me to conclude that any role which politics may have played in the campaign was not alone sufficient explanation of it.

There is also no clear evidence to suggest that disease was a major factor in the situation. As far as I am aware, no recent sudden increase in sickness and mortality had been experienced in Lango at the time of the campaign's eruption. I mention this because disease seems to have been significant in an earlier Lango witch-hunt which took place some fifty years before the one under discussion. Driberg (1923:241) tells us how, in 1917, an epidemic of cerebro-spinal meningitis in the area led to a spate of witch-hunting there. In that case, witch-finders from Bunyoro and Kumam were said to have been lucratively employed in "smelling out" witches from the Lango villages. Driberg notes that Lango themselves lacked their own ritual techniques for this purpose, and this of course fits with the apparent lack of ritual in the 1967 campaign. There were, it seems, traditional forms of divinatory ordeal (Driberg, *loco cit.* pp.214-5) by which those accused of witchcraft could be tested for it, but even these do not appear in the 1967 data. On the other hand, the beatings and tortures of the modern campaign, horrific as they were, did not result in the traditional custom of clubbing to death, and subsequent burning of the corpses of witches (Driberg, *loco cit.* p.241). It should be noted that in discussing this penalty, Driberg remarks that its severity was matched by the rareness with which accusations were usually made.

The combination of physical violence and judicial hearings, which characterised the 1967 Lango campaign, also marked it off sharply from the usual pattern of movements like Mucapi, which Audrey Richards herself studied. Thus Willis (in Douglas ed. 1970) tells us that an examination of such movements in different parts of Africa reveals a number of shared characteristics; and among these he specifies the "use of a relatively simple ritual procedure, intended to detect witches and neutralize them, at the same time giving protection 'against mystical

attack to the supposedly innocent".

The Lango campaign was clearly of a different sort from this general pattern which in fact has more in common with the "smelling outs" of 1917. There is, moreover, some slight evidence to suggest that more secular campaigns may be becoming more common in East Africa. Suzette Heald (1982 :91) notes that the vigilante groups which she encountered in Bugisu, in eastern Uganda, in the late 1960s were aimed at the eradication of both thieves and witches. Comparably, it appears from a recent report (Masanja & Mesaki, 1983) that a substantial number of suspected witches have been murdered in recent years in the Sukuma and northern Nyanwezi area of Tanzania, where there has also been a development of vigilante groups formed to combat cattle theft. In this case the killings seem to follow divinations on the sickness or death of the witches' alleged victims, and the murders are carried out either by such victims' kin or by hired killers. It is not suggested by the writers that a direct connection exists between the vigilantes and such killings, and indeed a feature of the situation seems to be that a majority of such murders remain unsolved by the police. Detected killers seem commonly to be younger men (20-40 years old) and in some cases those hiring them are said to be neighbours and even kin of the suspected witch (*loc. cit.* :92). Even without a direct connection, it seems to me likely in both these Sukuma/Nyamwezi contexts that there is a substantial lack of confidence in the ability of formal governmental institutions to serve the rural population's felt needs for order. The very idea of vigilante groups, of course, strongly suggests this (cf. Masanja & Mesaki, p.35), and the connection has been interestingly highlighted by Heald in the Bugisu case. For there, the activities of such groups appear to have become more intensive when District Council legislation resulted in a weakening of local authority structures at the village level (Heald, *loco cit.*). Such factors also seem likely to have been present in the Lango case, or at least in the tensions leading up to the campaign. However the eruption of the movement there did of course also coincide with an assumption on the part of eager villagers that Government and its local representatives were at last glad to support them in their activities.²

It may be useful at this juncture to return to some developments at the national level which may have had a bearing on this last point.

1967 was a busy year of major legislation during which the Obote government was very anxious to consolidate its power at the centre after the prophetic violence of the previous year. 3 On September 8th Uganda was declared a republic, and shortly afterwards clauses on teachers as 'public officers' was passed. A few days later, on September 26th and 27th, the Public Order and Security Bill had its second reading. This empowered the Government inter alia to arrest and detain people without trial" if they were believed to be endangering the security of the State. It is possibly not unduly fanciful to suggest that this period of political ferment in which a Bill such as this last one was being planned, debated and passed into law, despite serious opposition .misgivings, provides an encouraging climate for more local "public order and security" projects. Again, the indigenous comparison between the Lango campaign and the national five year development plan (1966/7 1970/1) is also worth recalling in this context. Perhaps it is such connections which may best help to account for the location of the campaign in the President's home area.

A further issue which may be of some relevance for understanding the campaign is its relation to change in Uganda laws on witchcraft. Once again the situation is a complex and uncertain one. The Witchcraft Act in force in 1967 had been formally made law in 1965 and it was very different from the old colonial Witchcraft Ordinance of 1912 (amended 1921). At the risk of oversimplification, it may be said that the Ordinance of 1912 was aimed largely at the prevention of witchcraft accusations and concomitantly at the suppression of the activities of "witch-doctors" and "witch-finders". The Ordinance pays a great deal of attention to this. It offers quite close definitions of the parties to whom legal imputations of a person's witchcraft can be made ("a court, the police or other proper authority") and it lays down substantially stiffer penalties for "witch-doctors" than for ordinary persons who make illegal imputations to other parties. It also states explicitly that "if in consequence of any imputation so made, an offence be committed by any person to whom such imputation was made or communicated, the person making such imputation shall be deemed to have abetted such offence and shall be punishable accordingly". The Ordinance does pay some attention to witchcraft itself, but it tends

to lay stress on intention and belief on the part of the alleged witch. It also specifies "possession of any instruments or articles commonly used in practising witchcraft" as an offence, though the penalties it stipulates are relatively light.

The 1965 Act in its turn makes much more of witchcraft and much less of witch-finding, as is indicated by the very title of the Act "An Act To Make Provision For The Prevention of Witchcraft And The Punishment of Persons Practising Witchcraft". The old clauses on illegal imputation of witchcraft are much watered down, and the only offence specified in this regard is imputation, other than before "a person in authority", which results in harm being done to the accused. No specific reference is made to "witch-doctors" or "witch-finders" in this context, though the penalties for such an offence are, admittedly, still potentially quite high, i.e. imprisonment for a period not exceeding five years. With regard to "witches" and "witchcraft", the 1965 Act lays considerable emphasis on "repute" as valid evidence in addition to belief and intention. The Act also contains clauses empowering a court to impose "exclusion orders" upon individuals convicted under the Act "in addition to or in lieu of any other punishment". By such an order, an individual can be prevented from entering and remaining in a specified area including and surrounding that in which the offence was committed for a period of up to 10 years after the completion of any prison sentence.

At first sight, at least, it looks as if this 1965 Act provides an encouraging basis for the sort of rooting out of witches which took place in Lango two years later. It is not wholly clear whether the prosecution of accusers would have been possible in some cases under the rules of wrongful imputation leading to harm, but I suspect that in most cases the usual early involvement of headmen and sub-chiefs would have given some protection against this, even if the will to prosecute was there. The main problem, however, with an attempt to connect the campaign with the 1965 Act is that the Act itself was an almost verbatim copy of a late colonial (1957) replacement to the old 1912 rules. So enhanced possibilities of witch-hunting and mass prosecutions had in fact been present for some ten years in the area rather than just two. While this may weaken the plausibility of an argument for a connection, however, it does not necessarily in itself destroy that argument. It could be that widespread public awareness of the new possibilities created in 1957 was subject to a time lag,

and that old fears about the negative attitudes of the Colonial government to witch-finding died hard. Perhaps Independence and the subsequent first publication of the newly independent country's "own laws" had much greater impact than the passing of an ordinance in, albeit late, colonial days. This like many other questions is regrettably much easier to pose than answer at this stage.

IV

In her own analysis of the Mucapi movement, Audrey Richards laid stress on the influence of European contact and with it a series of "violent changes in tribal organization and belief". Willis (1970) notes how Goody (1957) and Bohannan (1958) have subsequently suggested that such movements may have longer histories and deeper roots than such a view implies, though he adds that their critique does not thereby invalidate an emphasis of a more general kind on social change. The present case itself may well be understandable through a more general theory of this sort, and some of my arguments about the 1966-7 period in Uganda point in this direction. In addition to the political upheavals of the time, changing forms of stratification and political competition of the sort involving teachers, and fears of medicines obtained from outside local areas by those rich enough to buy them, might all be parts of such a general picture of the influence of change. However this may be, my own feeling about the 1967 Lango situation is that such a theory is not quite sufficient on its own. Judging at least from what I know of Labwor and the eagerness with which some of my neighbours waited for the campaign to move there, I would argue too for the presence of deep feelings of frustration and a sense (not wholly justified as we have seen) that the Colonial government and its successor had too long permitted evil in the form of sorcery and witchcraft to prevail. This too is something to which Audrey Richards refers in her study, and it helps to give supporting weight to the specificity of her analysis in terms of European influence. Contemporary Bemba, she tells us, normally felt impotent in the face of witchcraft. The poison oracle of the chief no longer functions and his subjects know that they cannot charge a witch in legal court. "No one will help us now" she was told "unless we help ourselves." It would be comforting to hope that the violence of the Lango villagers' 1967 campaign, which so strongly marked their efforts at such self-help, was in the main a

temporary aberration arising from their sense of sudden release into a new-found freedom to attack the evil which they believed had so long been allowed to flourish unchecked in their society. Such a view would predicate a shift into more peaceful times and processes, though it would not perhaps bode well for other areas where people waited in vain for such a campaign. The situation seems, however, to be heavily dependent on much wider factors than the frustrations of villagers. The political history of Uganda since that time has been one of persistent violence, reaching its culmination in the rise and fall of the Amin regime. As we in Britain know from Northern Ireland, such a history tends both to create revulsion towards cruelty and violence among those who have to live through it, at the same time as it, less happily, raises the thresholds of tolerance to what becomes counted as normal and acceptable. I need scarcely add that the end result of interaction between these conflicting tendencies in Uganda, as elsewhere, is as unpredictable as it is vitally important for the country's future.

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Footnotes

1. I use the terms "witches" and "witch-craft" somewhat loosely in this paper though I occasionally also refer to "sorcerers" and "sorcery" especially when my source material uses this term. Lango themselves (like Labwor) sometimes make a distinction rather like the Zande one, and it is of interest that Driberg (1923) documented its nature some 14 years before Evans-Pritchard's celebrated Zande monograph.
2. The vigilante groups in Tanzania do seem to have gained some official support after an initially lukewarm reception. (Masanja and Mesaki, *loc. cit.* p.35).
3. The violent strife between Buganda and the Central Government appears to have set the scene for much that followed and may also have been relevant in the present context.

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