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Précis - Report on Doctoral Research - Richard F. Salisbury Award (2014)

The people of the Acholi sub-region of northern Uganda are attempting to reconstruct their communities shattered by decades of war and political violence. While the conflict between the rebel Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and the state Uganda People's Defence Forces (UPDF) continues sporadically in neighbouring countries, life in the North of Uganda has been relatively calm since 2006. With this shaky peace has come a whole host of new challenges: the return of the majority of the population from internally displaced persons (IDP) camps to ancestral villages (including a generation of youth raised in the camps), the prosecution and/or social reintegration of wartime perpetrators and youth formerly abducted by the LRA, the ongoing struggle of grinding poverty, and volatile land disputes between residents, state representatives, and commercial stakeholders. But simultaneous with these complex difficulties exists a different sort of problem, that of repairing the deeply wounded relationships between living human beings and beings in the spirit world.

The mass and unjust violent deaths of the war, haphazardly acknowledged by the political elite, created a disruptive spiritual pollution that manifests itself in cases of gross misfortune, unexplained illness, mental disturbance, and the presence of vengeful ghosts (known as *cen*). In a recent case, for example, residents of one Acholi parish gathered to discuss why dozens of primary school students had seemingly become possessed, collapsing unconscious on the floors of their classroom while shouting incoherently, rolling around, and "acting mad." The origin of that "thing" or "things" (so-called by the school teachers) causing the strange behaviour was disputed by those present - some argued the children were being attacked by demons, others asserted that *cen* was the problem, a few suggested that perhaps the true culprit was of a biological origin, and still others claimed the ancestors were asserting their presence and demanding attention.

My doctoral research concerns the phantasmic events, rumours, and "things" of Acholi, such as those briefly introduced in the case above. With the support of generous funding from CASCA's Richard F. Salisbury Award, from 2013 to 2014 I conducted fourteen months of ethnographic research in Acholi to learn about how people talk about cosmological upsets (or if in fact they talk about "things" outside the language of spirits), how they respond to them, how they interact with them, what goes on around them, and what they have to do with violence, suffering, social change, and resilience. I discovered that what Acholi people say and do about such situations indicates that the recent history of the region (from colonialism and missionization to civil war, mass displacement and foreign intervention) has deeply divided social agreement on what it means to be an ethical human being - living or dead. The precarity of lived experience in Acholi - where individuals and groups find themselves continuously negotiating the uneasy categories of modernity and tradition, religion and secularism, and even life and death - is indelibly illustrated in such cases as the possession of school children.