

# **An Analysis of the Epistemic Link between the Catholic Religion and Violence in Uganda's History**

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## **Abstract**

Uganda's recent history of violence has had an interesting characteristic: it has arguably been mainly within the Christian and more specifically Catholic religious space. I examine four cases of religious-related violence in order to cipher the epistemic roots of such violence. The four cases are: the Uganda Martyrs; Ms Alice Lakwena and the Holy Spirit Movement; Mr Joseph Kony and the Lord's Resistance Army; and Ms Ceredonia Mwerinde and the Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God. I examine the literature critically in order to test the plausibility of various positions on the possible link between the Catholic religion and violence in Uganda. My analysis looks at the links both from the point of view of the perpetrators of violence and the adherent/victims of the violence. In the end, I find that the epistemic links are more justificatory/explanatory than they are causal.

**Keywords:** Religious violence, epistemics of violence, Uganda, Roman Catholicism

## **Introduction: Theoretical Background**

Violence in the Great Lakes Region of Africa in general, and violence in Uganda in particular, are not new phenomena. And if we consider the Great Lakes region as including the Horn of Africa, then violence in the Great Lakes Region has had a religious hue to it. A.B.K Kasozi has done a ground-breaking study of violence in Uganda (Kasozi 1994). His study has presented a causal

structure that explains why Uganda seems to be uniquely violent. I hope to give a new perspective, new in providing an epistemic rather than a causal structure. Kasozi provides a causal structure that helps explain violence across the traditional boundaries between ethnic groups, socioeconomic classes, cultures, power clusters, etc. I single out a different perspective to the continued violence in Uganda. What is new and interesting is that the brand of violence in Uganda has got the value of offering a counterexample to stock beliefs about violence in general, and religious violence in particular. This perspective on violence proposes answers to questions about violence *within* traditional boundaries (intra-ethnic, intra-class, intra-cultural, etc.)

What then is 'religious violence'? In order to arrive at an understanding of 'religious violence', let me define what I mean by 'religion' and what I mean by 'violence'. R.S. Appleby offers a functionalist and thus suitable definition of religion for the purposes of this paper. According to him, religion 'is the human response to a reality perceived as sacred, ... [or what] ... discloses and celebrates the transcendent source and significance of human existence ... [by the use of an] ... array of symbolic, moral, and organisational resources' (Appleby 2000: 8). Appleby suggests that the array consists of a creed (consisting of beliefs, values, meanings, myths, doctrines and dogmas), a cult (consisting in prayers, devotions, disciplines and rituals), a code of conduct (specifying moral norms of members) and a confessional community (that carries both personal and social identity with far reaching influence on both the individual and the community of members) (Appleby 2000: 8-9). This definition is suitable for two reasons. First, it enlightens the descriptions of religious activity that I lay out in the narratives. Secondly, because it is not essentialist, it is amenable to a diversity of expression, even within the same one religious grouping, in this case the Roman Catholic grouping.

I adopt the definition of 'violence' from J.R. Hall and M.R. Jackman. Thus far, violence encompasses 'actions that inflict, threaten or cause corporal, written or verbal injury' (Hall 2013: 364). While most of the violence I describe in the narratives ends up being physical, this definition is useful in the sense that it opens up discussion to a wider range of forms of violence and together with that, a wider range of victims and perpetrators of violence. As a synthesis, therefore, any form of action that befits violent action, committed in the perspective of any form of religion as defined here, would constitute 'religious violence'.

Now, the violence in Uganda has mostly happened within Roman Catholic environments, using Roman Catholic symbolism and vocabulary, and purporting to spring from Roman Catholic explanatory structures. I offer four case studies in this particular kind of violence in order to analyse whether one of two related theses holds: Whether a) something about the Roman Catholicism, at least in part, and in its Ugandan expression, prepares its adherents to be perpetrators and/or victims of violence; and/or b) independently of the central doctrine of Roman Catholicism, individuals and groups (easily) choose to, decide, or find themselves in a position to mete out or to suffer violence with the alibi of belonging to Roman Catholicism. From the outset it is clear that the first thesis can be particularist and potentially *ad hoc*. But J.R. Hall, discussing the particularising practices of inquiry provides a role for a historical approach which is cautious about ‘sacrificing empirical reality for systematic conceptual coherence’ (Hall 1999: 204). I will dedicate much time to a narration of the events, from which a sociological approach can draw more general trends. I do not seek by any means to distil a unified theory for understanding or explaining all similar occurrences (Harré [1979] 1993: 22-23). Rather, I will also suggest alternative explanations to the ones given by sociologists, by way of widening the debate and in the same breath of offering a possible counterexample to official sociological discourses. The theoretical background of my alternatives is that in them we can still have a coherent explanation of the various violent events.

The second thesis is of a more general nature – proposing something new about the epistemic links between Roman Catholicism and violence, and by extension a useful counterexample to apply to our understanding of the epistemic link between religion and violence. One could argue that the religious element in some of the conflicts presented is only accidental. But such an approach would not bear out the sophisticated role of religion. The key players in these conflicts have for some reason chosen the context of religion to carry out their violence. Closer attention to the narrative could exemplify what J.C. Scott warns about: ‘Formal, organised political activity, even if clandestine and revolutionary, is typically the preserve of the middle class and the intelligentsia; to look for peasant politics in this realm is to look largely in vain’ (Scott 1985: xv). Thus the nuance that religion brings is that in its organised or formal expression, it may be the only organisational structure that peasants or the disempowered may operate. Religion may be seen as a last resort – as the source of a rallying ideology. Religion may thus end up playing

a very key and sophisticated role in both providing an organisational structure and rallying ideology, as well as legitimating the violence that is suffered or meted out within and around or due to this organisational structure.

This view goes beyond the traditional position held by both Emile Durkheim and René Girard to the effect that violence is part and parcel of religion. For both of them, individuals and communities engage dutifully in violence whether to self or to others, in order to preserve the sacred in the midst of the profane and for the sake of purifying the profane. My theory on the outset is that individuals and communities strategically engage religion and within religion they further strategically engage in violence not because of some essential violent nature of religion, but as an epistemic strategy. Thus far, a common strand is that both the victims and perpetrators of religious violence hold on to a conviction (even as a strategy), that they are 'unique' in very special ways from the rest of society. They hold on to a very heightened sense of being 'special'. In some instances, the individuals and the group project that self-perception of uniqueness onto a leader who is perceived as charismatic, in the Weberian definition of 'charisma'. According to this latter,

Charisma may be either of two types. Where the appellation is fully merited, charisma is a gift that inheres in an object or person simply by virtue of natural endowment. Such primary charisma cannot be acquired by any means. But charisma of the other type may be produced artificially ... through some extraordinary means. Even then, it is assumed that charismatic powers can be developed only in people or objects in which the germ already existed but would have remained dormant unless evoked by some ascetic or other regimen. (Weber [1922] 1956: 2).

This approach may have more explanatory power for the incidence of religious violence on the one hand, as well as escape the reductionist error of the approach suggested by Durkheim and Girard in positing violence at the core of religion (cf. also Cavanaugh 2009, who gives a lot of power, including the power of reconciliation to religion, and at the opposite extreme, cf. Lewy 1974, who condemns religion outright as a scaffolding for the status quo).

Nevertheless, whatever the outcome of this enquiry, I hope to safely assert that religious violence is not the prerogative of any one religion. Therein, I hope, would lie the intended value of my research and questioning. I come to

the topic from a philosophical background, with the assumption that given that I am working within a perceived counterexample, rather than operate deductively from a pre-existing theoretical background, a series of questions within the philosophical area of epistemology will help hash out or point towards the beginnings of new theoretical structures. Still, my questions, reflections and pointers may find relevance within a specific understanding of sociological enquiry. On this latter, I draw inspiration from J.R. Hall who holds that sociological approaches are open to a multiplicity of factors, processes, explanations and interpretations, as well as being wary of reductionist tendencies (Hall 2013: 264).

### **Case One: Setting the Violent Stage - The Uganda Martyrs (1885-1887)**

As far back as the pre-history of Uganda as a nation, at the first meeting between Christianity, politics and traditional religion at the court of the king (or Kabaka) of Buganda, violence made its first and lasting mark. The Kabaka was traditionally vested with absolute powers, which were consistent with the overall belief system of the people of Buganda. While there were traditional religious leaders in the kingdom, their powers were checked by the powers of the absolute monarch. The monarch was both a symbol of the unity of the kingdom, and the assurance of the continued survival of the kingdom. Almost naturally, everyone owed unquestioned allegiance to the Kabaka. This cultural, political and religious balance was to be challenged with the arrival of Christianity in general and Catholicism in particular. As Faupel describes:

Between 1885 and 1887, within ten years of their first knowledge of the Catholic Faith, twenty-two boys and men of Uganda laid down their lives for their religion. The story of their conversion from paganism (*sic.*), of their battle for Christian virtue and of their sacrifice of life itself is told ... all were victims of Mwangi the Kabaka ... of Buganda, and the majority were also natives of that country ... [there had been] remarkable change wrought in the souls of these young men through the action of the grace and teachings of Christ (Faupel 1965:1).

Thus far, the Kabaka was an absolute monarch, ruling over a population of around three million, assisted by chiefs who were either appointed or banished according to his pleasure (even with the advice and counsel of the parliament) (Faupel 1965:1-2). Christianity had arrived in the Kingdom of Buganda, precisely at the court of the Kabaka. The adherents of the new religion were so convinced of the truth of their convictions that they were willing to lay down their lives. At the same time, the Kabaka literally drew a line in the sand on Wednesday May 26, 1886, to force his subjects to choose between obeying him and obeying the religion of the white foreigners. The white foreigners were of the mind that the ordeal should not be carried to its absolute and macabre limit, and they had tried to dissuade their charges, the neophytes, as well as plead for them before the irate Kabaka. Everything was in vain. As Faupel relates:

Several neophytes, five of whom had been baptized that morning, seemed unconcerned about what was to come, and joked together as if they had not a care in the world. Others, mainly the older ones, looked grave but calm. Though fully conscious of the ordeal by fire and sword that awaited them, they had schooled themselves to face it bravely without flinching. Some of their pagan (*sic.*) companions told them that they were fools to sacrifice themselves and urged them to flee before it was too late. To these they replied: 'Flee? Why should we? So that the Kabaka can treat us as deserters, rebels and cowards? Never! *We know that the sole reason for our death is our Faith, and we are ready to sacrifice to our Heavenly King even life itself.*' (Faupel 1965:148-149; italics added).

The violence in the epistemics of the adherents/victims of the impending massacre is apparent. This violence is linked to the violent epistemics in the absolute monarch who will not stop at anything to assert or defend his authority in his kingdom. For the monarch, it has become a matter of his personal and his kingdom's very survival.

The events of the martyrdom of the young men were in only one of several kingdoms of what was only much later to become the nation of Uganda. Nevertheless, a symbolic seed had been sown in the national memory of Uganda by way of setting a precedent – a seed nurtured by the religious veneration of the martyrs (especially within the Roman Catholic community)

as religious and national heroes, which seed would sprout to ensure that Ugandans in general could easily accommodate religious expression and violence. In the epistemic repertoire of Ugandans, some link had been set up to accommodate violence in the expression of religion, just as religion could be used in the expression of violence instigated by other motives, e.g. political or ethnic motives. In other words, what was being acquired was not just an epistemic attitude; epistemic strategies were being put in place. The epistemic stage was set on which both victims and perpetrators of violence could act in the course of Ugandan history. I do not claim a causal link between this one event and the subsequent expressions of religious violence. Rather, I posit a very weak thesis that in the social imaginary and the collective memory of Ugandans, the link was given a precedent.

This coupling of violence – between the strategies of the perpetrator and the beliefs of the adherent/victims and vice-versa, seems to run through the cases under study. I study the coupling under an epistemic perspective and I hope to be able to draw characteristics that throw light on the incidence of Christian (and specifically Roman Catholic) violence in Uganda's history. An outstanding epistemic attitude visible in this case of the Uganda Martyrs is one of extreme personal asceticism on the part of the victims, which asceticism is informed by religious convictions. This epistemic attitude meets with a hegemonic attitude on the part of the perpetrator. The Kabaka will not relent from meting out violence upon his subjects, in order not to relinquish any of his power and influence on his kingdom. For the sake of brevity, I do not go deeper into this case. Suffice it to say that given the distance in history (i.e. late 19<sup>th</sup> Century), I have raised the salient points for the purpose of my argument without the necessity of much more detail.

## **Case Two: Alice Lakwena and the Holy Spirit Movement (HSM)**

Alice Auma was born in 1956 in Bungatira, northern Uganda. Traditionally, Bungatira was the centre of a local cult built around a sacred rock with a mysterious footprint in it (Doom & Vlassenroot 1999:16). Alice turned to the Catholic religion in her teens. She grew up to be childless and, in the local belief system, a cursed woman, to be scorned upon and judged as a loose woman – a danger to other women's husbands (Behrend 1999:36ff). Local

belief has it that Alice disappeared under the waters of the River Nile in the middle of 1986, where she mysteriously stayed for 40 days, only to emerge with powers of a *nebi* (a prophetess). She was henceforth possessed of an array of spirits, mainly of a military nature in as far as they were spirits of dead military generals from various locations around the world, and some of them stretching from as far back into history as the Second World War.

Alice both believed and sought to convince those around her that she had a divine mission: 'to ... form a Christian movement which would rid Uganda of sin, especially witchcraft. She began as a healer and quickly morphed into a military commander, ordered on the 6<sup>th</sup> of August 1986 by a spirit called the Lakwena, to rally a guerrilla force set on dislodging the ruling National Resistance Army – NRA of Yoweri Museveni' (Kiyimba 2012:111). Consistent with this divine mission, in 1987, she formed the Holy Spirit Movement (HSM) also called Holy Spirit Mobile Forces (HSMF). She was the Commander in Chief of the HSM, or rather the Spirit was in command of the movement, and she went into a series of trances to receive the commands of the Spirit. Alice thus rallied around herself a band of ex-servicemen of the ousted national army (i.e. the Uganda National Liberation Army or UNLA), who had formed an unsuccessful rebel group, the Uganda Peoples Defence Army (UPDA)<sup>1</sup>. Their hope had been to quickly recapture power. They acted in the fear of retaliation from the new, incoming army (Yoweri Museveni's National Resistance Army – NRA), from the South of the country. In fact, the incoming NRA carried out atrocities, e.g. when its 35<sup>th</sup> Brigade massacred civilians in the north (Doom & Vlassenroot 1999:16ff). It is significant that the group held on to the appellation of 'Holy Spirit' – mainly understood within the limits of Catholic doctrine, even though the spirits believed to possess Alice were other than the one Holy Spirit. But in the mind of Alice and her followers, there was a smooth transition from the many spirits to the one Holy Spirit.

Alice understood and explained her ministry and mission as one of cleansing the ex-servicemen joining the rank and file of the HSM. The ex-servicemen needed cleansing from both an internal and external enemy, which enemies were mutually dependent. The internal enemy was their proclivity to senseless violence. The external enemy was the incoming NRA. The rank and

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<sup>1</sup> The change in name may simply be to indicate to members of the group and the people with whom they came into contact of the nature and calling of the group – to move rapidly from place to place in the execution of their duties.



file had to deny killing, sorcery, and sex, and to embrace Christian values of repentance and non-retaliation. The defeat of the internal enemy rendered the external enemy powerless. And the defeat of the HSM would be a direct result of moral laxity in their rank and file (Behrend 1999:45-46).

## **Violent Epistemics in the Perpetrators' Strategies (Naïve Hegemony)**

In part by strategy, and in part by the force of circumstance, Alice had put in place a new mechanism for meting out and receiving violence. As a background to this new mechanism, was a structure rooted in ritualised Acholi and Christian tradition. Thus far:

There had been a lot of syncretistic tendencies in the way Christianity was introduced or received in Acholi-land. The Acholi had been organized in several chiefdoms, each chiefdom having its own protective spirits – *jogi*. In relation to these *jogi*, in the public sphere, the Acholi had priests or *won ngom*; for private matters, there were the *ajwaka*. Besides, there were individuals who were possessed of *jogi* or *jok* (singular for *jogi*). With the coming of Christianity, new *jogi* were ushered in: *jogi setani* who were satanic spirits, but also *jok Jesus*, and according to a translation by Catholic missionaries, *tipu maleng*, the Holy Spirit which could manifest itself in many forms, e.g. the form of Lakwena – a *tipu*. New healers came into existence too – the *nebi* – a term carried over from the biblical *nebi* or prophet. The new healers, like Lakwena, did not use the gadgets of the *ajwaka* in their healing processes. Rather, they used holy water, crosses, and Catholic prayers and hymns with details of ritual drawn from the Old Testament. When her mission morphed into commanding war, Lakwena's novelty still found a basis in local Acholi folklore. The Acholi had two ways of going to war: either in order to attack (*lweny lapir*), or in defence and retaliation (*lweny kulo kwor*). In both contexts, war could be justified, i.e. it could be considered a just war – *lapi*. And the HSM considered that theirs was a just cause, *lapi* (Kiyimba 2012:113, as cited in Behrend 1999: 43-44).

To carry out her programme, again partly as a strategy and partly by force of

circumstance, Alice based her commands in the Spirit, Lakwena, and came up with a set of norms which she called the 'Holy Spirit Safety Precautions' backed with biblical quotations. She oversaw the strict observance of these, by decree. She also saw to the erection of a temple in Opit. The liturgies held at this temple mimicked something of the Catholic or Christian services in terms of being held on Sundays and feast days. And to preserve the link between the spiritual and the administrative, Lakwena decreed that the same temple be the venue for routine meetings and the proclamation of the commands of the Spirit. It was also the courtroom in which judgment was issued. Above all this, the temple was the headquarters of the HSM. Fighting, bloodshed, sorcery, etc. were out of bounds at the headquarters. Instead, adherents came in their large numbers to offer gifts in terms of money, animals, food, medicine, etc. Alice had authority over the masses to such an extent that they either exonerated her of her use of extreme violence, or they saw her authority precisely in the exercise of violence. The temple was later destroyed by the NRA soldiers, without thereby affecting the belief and dedication of the masses to the Spirit and to Alice. A naïve form of hegemony fed on a naïve form of hope for salvation, as epistemic strategies.

### **Violent Epistemics in Adherents/Victims (Naïve Salvation)**

Obviously, the HSM was not only constituted of ex-servicemen. There was a large following of peasant masses. What accounts for this large following? One *prima facie* reason for their enlisting could have been the fear of the possible retaliation from the south. But more importantly for the purposes of this paper, they believed in the cause that Alice was championing – to rid Uganda of evil by spiritual means, and the attendant military means as commanded by the Spirit. This points to a kind of epistemic strategy of naïve hope in salvation. Amii Omara-Otunnu is of the view that 'whether or not it was calculated, the issuing of her call in religious idiom served to appeal to people beyond Alice Lakwena's immediate social group; for in Uganda the Christian ideology often transcends ethnic loyalty and localized cultural practices, and it can act as a unifying factor across sociolinguistic boundaries' (cited in Behrend 1999:44).

Events took place that further buttressed the popular support and belief in the powers of the Spirit and of Lakwena. For example, Alice prophesied the destruction of the temple in Opit, a few days before it took place. She used a paraphrase of the biblical image: 'in three days, Jerusalem will be destroyed'.

She also provided the justification for the destruction – members of the HSM had violated the Safety Precautions. In a continuation of devotion, after the destruction, stones from the destroyed temple were transported to a new site in Arum and the concept of the ‘temple’ became spiritualised into a mobile presence among the rank and file of HSM, in the person of Alice (Behrend 1999:75-76). Meantime, concerning the internal enemy, Alice dissuaded a number of *ajwaka* from their sorcery. But as a sign of her absolute power, she saw to the persecution and often the killing of those who persisted in perceived sorcery. Also, Alice eliminated her rivals in a combination of Christian religion and military might. There was thus a network of violence both within the HSM and around it, in spite of or sustained by the beliefs in the Spirit. The perpetrators and the victims approached the violence from different starting points. For the perpetrators, meting out violence was justified because the order came from or was consistent with what the Spirit demanded. For the victims of the violence within the HSM, the violence was in the service of a bigger objective – salvation – theirs and that of the nation.

### **Case Three: Joseph Kony and the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA)**

Joseph Kony started life in Odek, in 1961. Early in life, he was an altar server in the Catholic Church. He tried unsuccessfully to operate as a prophetic leader, and joined the newly formed rebel armed group, the UPDA. In that group, he won popularity by 1987. He joined Alice’s movement (the HSM), but he soon fell out or was expelled. Instead, he created a gang, which was dubbed satanic and betrayers of his own Acholi people, by Alice (Doom & Vlassenroot 1999:21, 25-31). Interestingly, Joseph kept choosing Christian names for his rebel group. He moved from naming it the Holy Spirit Movement II, to Uganda People’s Democratic Christian Army, to Lord’s Salvation Army, and then United Democratic Christian Force, before settling to the current Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA), all in the space of about a year, 1988. It is possible that there was no sophisticated reason for his constant change in the name of his group. It is interesting, all the same, that the one common element in all the various names was the Christian/Roman Catholic terms he chose at each time. What were the epistemic strategies in the violent engagement of Joseph Kony?

## **Violent Epistemics in the Perpetrators' Strategies (Sophisticated Hegemony)**

Joseph portrayed himself as starting something new. He adopted the Safety Precautions of the HSM. He came up with a new set of rituals, beliefs and practices whose effectiveness depended on his personal sanction. He disrespected and disregarded traditional Acholi leadership (i.e. the *rwot* or local chiefs). He was the sole authority in the movement. He preached an apocalyptic message, according to which the Acholi were in danger of extinction if there was no radical moral reform. And the nemesis of the Acholi was the incumbent president of Uganda, Yoweri Museveni, and his army. Joseph was committed to the lot of the Acholi, but he was sympathetic to non-Acholi adherents, as long as they had undergone a cleansing/initiation ritual by the sprinkling with holy water and anointing with shea-butter. His proclaimed programme was to found political rule according to the Ten Commandments, beginning with Acholi, and spreading over the whole of Uganda. Straying from his commands and directives resulted in corporal punishment, and later in the evolution of the movement, even the death of the alleged culprit. Joseph was and is intolerant of any rivalry. All other mediums are bounden to his directives, and they are relegated to exorcisms, prophecies, and the like.

But Joseph incorporated some elements and some members in his rank and file, beyond the purely spiritual. When Odong Latek, a commander in the UPDA arrived to join Joseph's LRA, he brought along with him 39 trained soldiers from the the UPDA. Latek persuaded Joseph to become specifically professional in applying tried and tested guerrilla manoeuvres, over and beyond mere charisma. Joseph adopted some professional military techniques, but his guiding discourse remained religious and millenarian (Behrend 1999:172). In addition to taking over professional techniques, Joseph allowed Dr. Kweya, a trained doctor to treat the wounded and the sick (Behrend 1999:184). And so Joseph went beyond the spiritual methods to espouse non-spiritual methods. Two things remained constants: his unquestioned hegemony, and its attachment to a spiritual source over which source he had a monopoly.

Further, Joseph has received sustained and substantial aid from the government in Khartoum. This aid consists in materiel (i.e. weapons, satellite phones, uniforms, jungle boots, etc.), as well as training facilities in outposts like Ikotosh, Teretenya, Magwee and Pajok. In fact, Joseph has returned the

favour to the Islamic government in Khartoum by introducing elements of Islamic practice among his commandments. Thus far, the rearing of pigs or working on Fridays is punishable by death or amputation (Behrend 1999:196). The victims here have included his own Acholi people. ‘...the LRA has been responsible for some major massacres, such as Atiak (an estimated 170-220 dead, 22 April 1995); Karuma (50 deaths, 8 March 1996); Acholpi refugee camp (100 deaths, July 1996); Lokung-Palabek (over 400 dead, January 1997)’ (Doom & Vlassenroot 1999:25).

### **Violent Epistemics in Adherents/Victims (Sophisticated Salvation)**

For the people in his following, Joseph was and is a charismatic leader, with unique gifts, among which are rhetoric and drama (Doom & Vlassenroot 1999: 21), and performing miracles and divinations (Amony 2012: xxxvii). His followers and victims believe he is in the possession of a wide range of spirits from around the globe. They see a consistency in his claim of being the mouthpiece of God and an instrument to re-found the Ten Commandments in the running of political life in Uganda. Joseph’s method of recruiting new members revolved around abductions – mainly of children. His claim was that the abductions were means to save the children from corruption in good time before the apocalypse. He made the male children soldiers and killers, and the girls became sex slaves. Temmerman, Green and Amony have written journalistic and biographical accounts that attest to the brutal methods and confused intentions of Joseph – a confusion between doing good for his victims and brutalising them.

### **Case Four: Ceredonia and the Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God (MRTC). A Dialogue with Vokes<sup>2</sup>**

For our purposes, the most authoritative analysis of the events that led to and culminated in the death of at least 1000 members of a cult in Uganda, at the

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<sup>2</sup> The study of Vokes has been chosen not only for the in-depth grappling with the event, but also because it is perhaps the only such study of the event.

turn of the century, is provided by Richard Vokes. Vokes is engaged in social-anthropological research on the question of the causal structure of what happened in Kanungu and in the Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God (MRTC). He does detective work in documenting the background of life and practice that led to the fateful day, as well as correcting the erroneous accounts of what happened on the day. He narrates his own version of what must have happened, backed with arguments. He has done a valuable job. I find much of what he holds convincing, but I find the devil in the details. I do not present his argument in its entirety, given the limited space I have. I hope that what I do not present, does not distort the substance of his argument. I rather address those parts of his bigger argument, that I find crucial and yet incomplete.

### **Presenting the Protagonists**

First among the protagonists was Mr Kibweteere. Mr Joseph Kibweteere had been a very active member of the Catholic lay organisation, as well as being a political party mobiliser of the main opposition party (the Democratic Party – DP) in a very dangerous time of the political history of Uganda. He claimed to have received a vision of the Blessed Virgin Mary, during a walk in the hills around Kabale town. In the vision, the message of the Blessed Virgin Mary to him was that there was widespread moral decadence, which would result in perdition, unless people the world over changed their ways and reinstated a life based on the biblical Ten Commandments. The vision is alleged to have happened in April 1984. As a consequence of the vision, Kibweteere swung into action, to found the Movement of the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God (MRTC or MRTCG). His wife was the first adherent to the message. There were several informal meetings organized by the Kibweteere couple. To one of these came one Ceredonia Mwerinde (Vokes 2009:102-105).

Ceredonia was herself receiving similar visions at the same time as Kibweteere, and in one of them it was revealed to her that she would meet one Joseph, with whom they would change the world. Ceredonia had had an eventful life that included divorce and remarriage, and some kind of concubinage. In her latter union, she was not blessed with children and was despised for being infertile. She was also despised for being a barmaid in her home in Kanungu. In spite of (or perhaps linked to) the bad reputation, she

started receiving visions from around 1988. She abandoned her earlier life and focused on receiving and passing on messages received in visions which occurred very frequently in the context of prayer. In one of such sessions, she led her band of followers back to Nyabugoto caves, the former centre of the activities of Nyabingi an ancient or traditional oracle of fertility. The visions multiplied, and the message was bigger than fertility in marriage. The message of the visions was recorded on tape and distributed. By and large, other founders of the MRTC could only perform healing ceremonies, and the receiving of visions became the prerogative of Ceredonia. A para-liturgy emerged, around which the followers in residence built their day. It involved long hours of common prayer and hours of manual labour, often in silence. Orders of the details came more and more from the visions allegedly received and as communicated by Ceredonia, often in autocratic style. The details took up more and more of the day-to-day running of the lives of the members. Orders to members included mandatory sale of property, and working in silence, as well as no communication with non-members (Vokes 2009:116). The members became more and more bonded to her, hanging on the details of the vision she would receive. At the same time, Ceredonia inspired fear among the members. She took over the whole running of the movement, demoting and punishing those who were considered aberrant, including fellow leaders. All commands came from visions channelled through Ceredonia. Very soon, the wife of Kibweteere opted out of the movement, and so did Fr Ikazire, who doubted the authenticity of Ceredonia's visions (Vokes 2009:118).

The visions were likened to others from overseas, from other visionaries still in communion with the Catholic Church, whose visions were printed on leaflets and circulated. Meantime, the MRTC was to be banned and ostracized by the local authorities of the Catholic Church. This ban was mainly ignored both by the leadership of the MRTC and by the regular members.

Among the leadership were a few well-respected priests of the diocese of Mbarara: Fr Dominic Kataribaabo, Fr Paul Ikazire, and Fr Joseph Kasapuraari. The first two were well respected and long-serving members of the clergy and of a massive and active international devotional group in the Roman Catholic church, called the Legion of Mary. Kataribaabo was well-educated and had held high office in the diocese. The third one was still young, having joined the movement as a newly ordained priest in his twenties. The activities of the movement were under scrutiny by the Bishop, who was in contact with the highest authority in the Catholic hierarchy – the Pope in Rome

(Vokes 2009:113). This latter had advised that the activities of the movement would be acceptable, if they remained charitable, non-divisive, and in obedience to the Pope in Rome.

The leaders faltered on these stipulations, when Kataribaabo is alleged to have been preaching division, pointing out that some in the Catholic hierarchy were flawed persons. In 1991, papal interdictions were served to the three and the movement was banned. The movement then continued to gather in private residences mostly in the southwest of Uganda, but also in Kampala. As the events unfolded, mass graves were discovered and hundreds of bodies exhumed at these private residences, after the fires at Kanungu. I mention already here, as a useful clue, that the exhumed bodies were alleged to have been buried a few months or weeks before the fires at Kanungu. All in all, each of the leaders was a rather impressive and strong character – a leader in society of some kind. It might even be the case that they were extremely intelligent and disciplined. They showed no chink in their epistemic armour. They were the kind of leaders that could hold sway over the will of their followers and claim complete allegiance.

### **Presenting the Adherents/ Victims**

The movement drew its membership primarily from those who already belonged to the Legion of Mary in southwestern Uganda and elsewhere, as long as these latter had a link with the Legion of Mary in the southwest of Uganda. The second channel for recruitment was by way of visits to homes. The movement leadership would write beforehand to introduce the matter of their intended visit. When invited, they would come to the targeted home and stay for a few days or weeks, during which time they spread the doctrine of the movement and attended to the family and other people invited by the family (usually close and trusted friends or members of the wider family). According to Vokes, the families visited were chosen on their basis of being probable candidates, either because someone in the family had succumbed to HIV/AIDS, or there had been a misfortune of similar proportions, etc. Before the family members would be accepted into the movement, they would have to pay a fee to the leadership, and then move into any of the designated residences of the movement and be formed in the doctrine and practices of the movement. Those who eventually joined were strongly encouraged to convince members of their families and friends to join (Vokes 2009:126-130). The majority of



those who joined were women and their children or dependents.

In addition, the movement had a book, *A Timely Message from Heaven: The End of the Present Times*, first published in 1991, and then published again in 1996. It was in four languages commonly used in the southwest: Runyankore/Rukiga, English, and Luganda. The contents of the book were mainly reports on visions received by various members in the leadership. From these accounts of visions flowed an elaboration of the key beliefs and practices of the movement. Chief among these beliefs was the urgent and salvific power in a return to a personal life guided by the Ten Commandments, the recitation of the rosary, etc. (Vokes 2009:136). The book was used in the courses to form new members, reportedly more often than the use of the Bible (Vokes 2009:135).

As part of their spiritual formation, in preparation for their meeting with a panel of leaders, each member was given an exercise book in which to list all the personal and intimate sins he or she had committed since birth to the present. In an interview about the list generated, a sum of money was agreed upon as compensation – similar to the traditional ritual of *okutoija*. Ceredonia would then be asked to plead with the Virgin to forgive the sins. In return, the movement took care of its members by the redistribution of the wealth accumulated through the process of *okutoija*. The members did menial chores like cultivating or even hiring their labour out to neighbours. In between work and rest, the members prayed a lot.

## **Why it Happened: A Complex and Contentious Causal Mosaic of Violent Epistemic Strategies and Beliefs**

According to Vokes, the MRTC was a secret network for much of its history, comparable to the one that had planned and carried out the Rwandan genocide in 1994 (*akaju*), and the one behind the instability in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. And this secretive nature, he argues, is built on a historical set of local logics and practices related to a fertility goddess, Nyabingi (Vokes 2009:12, 13). This goddess, according to Vokes, was only accidentally anti-colonial and violent contrary to popular belief. The movement's main role was to provide means of redressing people in Kiga society (mainly women) for misfortunes suffered, which misfortunes (*ekibi*) were reinterpreted in terms of fertility or infertility (*engumba*). Thus, in the event of a misfortune, a member

of the family would receive visions (*okworekwa*) whose content was directives on what offerings (*okutoija*) to bring (usually exorbitant), before, during and after the intervention of Nyabingi through a medium in order to earn cleansing. It is important to note that part of the offering went to the medium as a payment for mediatory services. Vokes explains the secrecy as a strategy for multiple and sometimes contradicting membership. But overall, the group was an informal, loose network, and membership and secrecy was almost always eroded (Vokes 2009: 12-15).

There is reason to believe that the secrecy was not a strategy. I suggest that if they were secretive, it was by default. It was a personal and private affair, that one decided to return to a life of the Ten Commandments, even when one felt sympathy especially for relatives and friends who would not be persuaded to join in the movement to return to the Commandments. Further, the image of Noah's Ark is prominent at the end. The members were gathering in Kanungu in order to enter the Ark. The biblical origins of the image show that not every human and animal was supposed to be part of the Ark. Many would ignore the warning of the coming doom, and be left out. Pushing the strategy of secrecy too hard would make of it an active strategy to exclude. Rather, the decision to join and follow this movement was in the arena of personal or internal forum.

Another cornerstone for the activities of MRTC was the Catholic lay movement called the Legion of Mary (also *Legio Mariae*). It provided a platform for lay organisation and lay activity – a sort of grassroots Catholic lay engagement. The majority of the membership is female, and it cuts across social boundaries of class. In their activities, the Legion of Mary goes to homesteads and engages with individuals and families in conversation and prayer about what really concerns the people – from personal illness to bad marriages, unemployment, etc. Vokes emphasizes that fertility and the lack of it was an important point that was discussed, in the context of the Virgin Mary providing a way forward in terms of material or spiritual respite (Vokes 2009:18, 101).

Thus far, Vokes holds that the Nyabingi network provided redress by way of a redistribution of goods. What had been brought in by way of offerings was then redistributed among those who had fallen on hard times. This network was replaced by the missionaries and rendered international, linked into the international networks of the missionaries. He argues that 'for local participants the inherent power of Nyabingi mediums, and of the networks they operationalized, stemmed from their ability to invoke a categorically distinct

‘other’, located beyond the realm of everyday, quotidian experience’ (Vokes 2009:19).

Vokes argues that ‘we can understand why the translation of Nyabingi networks into a Catholic idiom should have served to amplify their power, given that, in the process, the key symbol of the local fertility goddess was transformed into something altogether more remote – and therefore potentially more powerful – that of the Catholic Virgin Mary’ (Vokes 2009: 20). The problem with this analysis is that when we follow the causal network further, we do not find the expressions of violence wherever the Virgin Mary has been venerated. In other words, this analysis seems to beg the question. The cause for violence is not given full account.

Vokes contends that the new medium, Ceredonia Mwerinde, consciously used the venues, the vocabulary, the devotional and ritual apparatus, of the old Nyabingi network in order to claim a continuity with this latter, which would win her the needed legitimacy and sway over the new and emerging following (Vokes 2009:23, 102, 121-4). But Vokes does not rule out a crucial possibility that Ceredonia was actually replacing and repressing the old network by the very same method. Ceredonia is likely to have been proposing a more Catholic network. This would portray her as less manipulative, and her following less gullible, and yet more committed. In the same one action, they would reject a practice that was scorned by the teaching of the Church, as well as use a language that is familiar. Vokes surmises that the visions of Ceredonia were irresistible in comparison to those of other visionaries, because she made the conscious link between her visions and those of the mediums of the ancient Nyabingi. Yet the same counterargument as above can be forwarded: she used the link, in order to replace and repress the ancient Nyabingi cult. For Vokes, the Roman Catholic priests fell for Ceredonia’s visions, precisely because of the link she made between herself and the ancient Nyabingi cult (Vokes 2009:124). But given their formation and experience, it is more likely that they stuck with her because she represented the replacement and suppression of the ancient Nyabingi cult.

And so, Vokes makes a great intellectual effort to draw links between Ceredonia, the Movement, and the ancient cult of Nyabingi. The links he draws are meant to be of a causal nature, over and above a merely precedental or explanatory nature. He portrays Ceredonia as seeking legitimacy and acceptance by the members, by aping the handmaidens or mediums of Nyabingi. She thus depicts herself as a modern day handmaiden of a modern

day Nyabingi – the Blessed Virgin Mary (Vokes 2009:23). But this epistemic strategy collapses, when one thinks of her target following as committed Christians, who have thus turned their backs on traditional religious practices. Also, Ceredonia was not limited to recruiting members from a following that knew what the ancient Nyabingi cult was about. Her catchment area went beyond those who remembered the cult of Nyabingi. Further, there is the question of the generation gap. Vokes does not make an effort to show that the Nyabingi cult was extant in the time of the rise of the Movement. A more economical explanation is to consider that if there was an imitation of Nyabingi by Ceredonia, it was to borrow an epistemic apparatus that would function. In other words, Ceredonia might have turned to the ancient Nyabingi cult, more for the structure than the content and legitimation. Nyabingi had more of a heuristic role than a causal role.

There is a way in which Vokes tries to fit the whole phenomenon into the category of networks. This might end up being overly materialistic. The materialism does not help to explain the suicidal element that is residual after all the other possibilities have been entertained. At the end, it is still plausible that those who ‘helped’ poison the majority, themselves perished in the fires. The networks should be understood as going beyond the merely material ends. Further, a problem I have with the grounding of the event in Nyabingi networks as a cause, is that it makes the event very unique and special at the risk of losing its causal value. Vokes has done extensive research and engaged the local population and those affected. But I think he does not have to use all the data he has found. We are left with a situation of overdetermination. One may ask: How can we use this information to predict and pre-empt other such events? I infer from the events a simpler causal network, one that seems to reproduce itself in other such events, and one about which pre-emptive intervention can be organized.

I find a further problem with Vokes’ reductionist analysis that brings the causal network to material reasons – wealth redistribution, etc. I think this was only secondary. The spiritual motives must have had a firmer grip on the members. The material analysis would not explain the final day of the MRTC, unless the cause of the death of the numbers is explained in terms of a murder. Rather, the spiritual reason would be a better explanation, even of the apparent non-mass suicide that is likely to have taken place. Most of the victims had died of poison, and those who remained might have committed suicide, out of millennial/religious conviction.

Also, Vokes ought not to make too much of infertility, polygamy, etc. These were the pastoral problems that Christians dealt with on a daily basis. So, if people were seeking to make Christianity relevant to the life of people, these questions would have to be addressed. The Ten Commandments had to have a bearing on these common social happenings. A spiritual approach to addressing the HIV/AIDS problem was very much to be expected – no strategy was left behind in addressing the problem.

I note that according to Vokes, the movement did not start out as a millenarian movement. And for most of its existence, in the accounts of visions and in its doctrine, millenarianism was not a central cord (Vokes 2009:166). But the movement did pick up on millenarianism, in an accelerated fashion, from around 1991. This was about the time the Roman Catholic priests joined. And the emphasis was on an imminent biblical apocalyptic end of the world. The message was very concrete about the catastrophes that would take place, and the pain and turmoil that would engulf the world. This was a shift from a generic Final Judgment. Events were being described in great and gory detail (Vokes 2009:168-170). The movement was perhaps confirmed in their enhanced apocalyptic doctrine by the Marian leaflets that came from Marian movements around the world (USA, Australia, etc.) sharing the content of Marian visions. These leaflets, too, emphasized the urgency of a life lived according to the Ten Commandments, and the imminent punishment that would befall the world, and especially those who faltered. The movement's book, *A Timely Message*, begins to point at a specific period around the year 2000 as the likely time for the apocalypse. There would be no year 2001, as that would be the New Year number one (Vokes 2009:179).

For Vokes, the people who went over to the movement came from a violent experience of bereavement, infidelity or terminal illness in the person or family. They came from a violent context. The key visionary who delivered commands from the Virgin Mary, Ceredonia, often came to the scene in violent mode – screaming orders, falling over, etc. There was neither compromise nor discussion about the orders she breathed. Anyone who strayed from, or disobeyed the orders was dealt with violently. The day of apocalypse when it would dawn, would be a day of violence, causing death and destruction to the environment (Vokes 2009: 195-199).

Resorting to Actor Network Theory (ANT), Vokes argues that non-human factors might have intervened to cause the final collapse of the MRTC. Such non-human agents include animals, climate, food, etc. (Vokes 2009:26).

In light of this, and perhaps as an explanation of the presence of exhumed bodies at various residences of the movement, the southwest of Uganda suffered an outbreak of malaria, brought about as a side effect of the *el Nino*, that would have claimed scores of lives in the crowded dormitories in which the members lived. Bodies were then transported under cover of night to be buried at chosen sites (Vokes 2009:200). Given that many of the members could have been HIV/AIDS affected or infected, with depressed immunity, the death toll could be imaginably high. Following the *el Nino* was a period of drought, which saw a drop in food production. Many members of the movement were going hungry and were emaciated. They could have been enabled to bear the pain of hunger in a context of religious fasting for the sins of the world (Vokes 2009:204-205).

In the findings of the Uganda Human Rights Commission, there was evidence at the sites of mass graves, of possible poisoning. The remains of bonfires were a frequent sight, and in these remains were small bottles of the same size which could have contained poison. The two causes of death in numbers are not mutually exclusive. Also, the possibility of suicide is not ruled out, given the millenarian character of the group. Those who were left behind would see the days of darkness and turmoil.

And so, most likely, on the fateful day, Friday 17 March, the members of the group, together with some friends they had invited, gathered at the movement headquarters in Kanungu. The event was supposed to be a final vision of the Virgin Mary, and a feast. In the dining hall, they were served a big meal. The windows of the dining hall had been boarded up from outside. A fire was then either kindled or broke out. The bodies of the victims of the fire were mainly in one heap towards one end of the burnt out building, without signs of trying to escape, nor a pugilistic stance that comes with death by fire. The people were most probably dead by the time the fire broke out (Vokes 2009:207-209). I argue that the people might have been very close to death, in the case of a mass suicide or a mixture of both suicide and murder. Vokes argues that in the case of mass murder, a small core of murderers might have practiced their mission on other victims at various compounds in order to make sure it would be effective on the final day (Vokes 2009:213).

Vokes is probably right in pointing out that an aggravating or precipitating circumstance is the HIV/AIDS epidemic that hit the southwest of Uganda very hard. According to Vokes, this epidemic hit right at the social nerve for which people in the past had turned to the Nyabingi network –

fertility. Not only were families losing a bread winner or both breadwinners, the redistribution of property was being affected (Vokes 2009:21). I agree in part with this line of argument: the AIDS epidemic rendered so many powerless and destitute. But on a closer look, Kanungu, which was the main operational area for the MRTC, was not the worst hit by the epidemic. Rakai district, which was the epicentre of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, is a district away. Vokes' analysis leaves something unexplained. The people are faced with a desperate situation. And the Nyabingi network could have provided the necessary safety net, where people could count on some redress. In the view of Vokes, with the number of Catholic missionaries going down, and the international link that brought in material help all but severed, people resorted to a network that was outside the Church – an independent church like the MRTC. A problem arises about this analysis that it points at the material redress that people hoped to get from the MRTC: the entrance fees, Vokes points out, were exorbitant. It defeats the purpose to spend even the little that they had left in order to be part of the group. A more compelling reason to join would be a spiritual reason. But the resort to violence is still unexplained.

I contend that the MRTC did not really become a sect or an African Independent Church (AIC), as Vokes portrays it (Vokes 2009:101). Looked at from the inside, it remained at the periphery of the Church, within the Church – in the minds of the regular members. They considered that they were the minority that was doing the right thing, being truly Catholic. At most, they were parasitic to the existent Catholic network. The alternative would be to give too much organizational power to the leadership (even though some of the leaders had exercised such leadership *within* the Catholic Church, prior to their being condemned and ostracised). In fact, the members continued to visit parishes in order to recruit new members. They also attended Catholic ceremonies, whenever they went back home from the headquarters (Bagumisiriza 2005:105-110).

## **Conclusion**

What role, then, has religion played and is it likely to play in the perpetration of violence in Uganda? I induce from the treatment of these four cases, that the role played by religion in violence has been centrally explanatory/justificatory, rather than causal. On examining the epistemic processes in the perpetrators I have found that the perpetrators have usually been individuals, making

personal decisions, rather than whole sections of society acting *en masse*. These individuals, in as far as they were perpetrators of violence, have been endowed with outstanding leadership qualities, e.g. very strong characters at best and strong egos and intransigent or hardened views at worst. The strong characters might in turn stem from past inadequacies that need to be compensated for or definitively revoked, or they could be built upon past success that has been interpreted in a realistic manner to be an indicator of being right, or having access to the truth. In either case, the individuals have held an overweening sway on the minds, hearts or wills of their adherents/victims. And when these individuals are victims of violence, they have been involved in a personal decision based on deep conviction about a better life or salvation. In a second moment, the adherent/victims, in turn, have usually been masses, or whole sections of the population, acting in mutual encouragement or in uniformity. These adherent/victims have either willingly or piously surrendered their critical faculties and then their lives, either imbued by a belief, or overwhelmed by a crisis and by their perceived role (and guilt for) the crisis. In the particular case of Uganda, as I remarked at the beginning, all this has happened in a context of a high precedence of both religion and a high incidence of violence of other forms (political, economic, ethnic, etc.).

The consistent justification/explanation for both kinds of individuals, rather than the obvious *cause* of such an epistemic attitude, has been a claim to a divine mind or divinely given authority. The divine has been portrayed or received by both perpetrators and adherent/victims as having an influence that spans present life, into an afterlife. And where the victims/adherents have been contra to the views of the perpetrators, the victims have been willing to lose their lives, rather than succumb to the will of the perpetrators. Added to this context, there has been a situation of the capitulation of political structures and marked political negligence. The Catholic space in Uganda has brought all these factors together, right from the moment of evangelization, to present expressions of the lived faith. But I contend that the situation is not unique to Uganda, and in fact it is repeatable.

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