

# “Acholi Youth Are Lost”: Young, Christian and (A)political in Uganda

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## Introduction

During a focus group discussion with a group of young adults in northern Uganda<sup>1</sup> in January 2013, a rather heated debate broke out over whether or not youth in post-war northern Uganda were ‘lost’. What constituted being lost? If youth were indeed lost, was it their own fault? Was the reason for their ‘lostness’ the war between the Lord’s Resistance Movement/Army (LRM/A) and the Ugandan government, in the midst of which they had grown up? Or were the elders to blame, having failed to guide young people and provide them with the support they needed? Or rather, was the real culprit the Internet, through which Western values were infiltrating Acholi lifeworlds?

The group, which two of my research assistants had recruited from among their friends to conduct participant observation at Christmas morning services as part of my research on churches in post-war Acholiland, provided a representative cross-section of the well-educated young urban population in the region. Of the 20–30-year-olds, a few were active Catholics, another few active Protestants;<sup>2</sup> some had one foot in a Pentecostal-Charismatic church (PCC)

1 Northern Uganda or Acholiland is formally known as the Acholi sub-region, an area inhabited primarily by speakers of the Acholi language, whom I refer to as the Acholi. According to the latest census, there are 1.47 million ethnic Acholi in Uganda, amounting to 4.4 per cent of the total population. Kitgum is one of seven administrative districts in the sub-region, and the total population of its centre, Kitgum town, is approximately 45, 000 residents. (UBOS 2016).

2 Following Ugandan practice, I refer to the Church of Uganda, which is an Anglican church, and to its members, as ‘Protestants’, and to the Roman Catholic Church in Uganda simply as Catholic. These two mainline churches set root in Acholiland in the early 1900s, by way of Catholic Italian Comboni missionaries, and the British Church Missionary Society. The two churches played crucial roles in Uganda’s political history, and still constitute the two largest denominations, although increasingly competing for members with the rapidly proliferating and expanding Pentecostal-Charismatic churches (see Alava 2017b, Bompani 2016, Bremner 2013, Ward 2015).

and the other in one of the old missionary-established churches; some had a church-going family but themselves felt increasingly distanced from any religious community; and one was a fiery assistant pastor at a small Pentecostal church. While the group disagreed about many of the questions I list above, there was one thing on which they all agreed: increasing numbers of young Acholi could rightly be characterized as 'lost'.

In this chapter, I analyse how the public discourse of 'lost youth' in post-war Acholiland manifests and is engaged with, particularly among well-educated Catholic and Protestant youngsters and young adults in the region who considered themselves 'not lost'. I argue that the discourse of 'lostness' emerged in relation to my young informants' disillusioned views on formal politics and the Ugandan state, and suggest that in distinguishing themselves from those who are 'lost', and in suggesting solutions to 'lostness', young Catholics and Protestants were expressing a particular kind of political agency: not being lost was seen as a prerequisite to being able to contribute to societal development and, ultimately, to being a politically engaged citizen. Finally, I demonstrate that, although the discourse of 'lostness' expressed a moral-panic type concern with the perceived uncontrollability of youth (Diouf 2003), embodying desires for rather conservative societal transformations, the discourse was also employed as a tool of critique against the ruling government.

The chapter draws from altogether nine months of ethnographic fieldwork that I conducted in a Catholic and Protestant parish in northern Uganda's second-largest town, Kitgum, between 2012 and 2016. Every Sunday morning, the churches of these denominations fill up for two services, packed to the brink with a largely young crowd. This is no surprise, considering that under-20-year-olds make up nearly 60 per cent of the national population (in 2014, UBOS 2016, 14), and that Uganda is, at least statistically and by confession, Africa's most religious country (Pew Research Center 2010). In recent years however, many young Catholics and Protestants have switched to Pentecostal churches while of those young people who attend mainline missionary churches, only a minority invest time in church outside of regular Sunday services. It is this minority – specifically, young adults who take on responsibilities in church administration, the youth team or the parish choir – that I spent most time with during my fieldwork, and whose perceptions of politics I focus on in this chapter.

Although my informants were well-educated, lived in an urban setting, and were thus hardly representative of 'Acholi youth' as a whole, they also lived amid considerable constraints and frustrations with regards their aspirations: jobs were sparse, and even those with secure incomes were often weighed down by the expense of relatives or younger siblings who frequently lived under their

care. As one of my informants put it to me, due to the lack of genuinely viable alternatives for the future, many young people gambled on getting lucky at a betting agency or simply despaired, took to the bottle and partied their way into HIV-infection. In contrast to such ‘lost’ trajectories, my informants posited themselves as people who did the best they could in trying circumstances: they educated themselves, farmed the land they had access to through their clan or that they rented with groups of friends or developed small business ventures. But, at the same time, they moulded themselves into individuals who might be spotted and trusted by business associates, future employers or potential benefactors: they went to church, dressed smartly, joined the choir and did things considered socially respectable. Since these activities took considerable time and effort, and since there was, as I will show, no trust in formal politics, the young men and women I knew in Kitgum largely saw attending political rallies or worrying over which corrupt and useless party should receive their vote as rather pointless.

Following this introduction, I briefly frame the interests driving this chapter in light of literature on politics and religion in Africa. Thereafter, I introduce the research context, and describe the way in which ‘lostness’ was articulated in post-war Acholiland. I then show how, since attitudes towards formal politics were characterized by disillusionment, it was considered more productive to gear attempts at transformation through other means than those offered by formal politics. Finally, I suggest that while young Catholic and Protestant adults can in some sense be described as conservative conformists, their attempts at moulding themselves and other youth into productive members of the community can be seen as a deeply political project. The chapter closes with comments on what the case I analyse offers to studies on youth and politics in Africa more broadly.

### Unpacking Politics and Religion

From a state-centric perspective, youth who primarily engage in religious activities rather than party politics or NGO-type civil society activism might be classified as ‘apolitical’. But what constitutes politics? Manglos and Weinreb recently analysed the extent to which religious activity correlates with what they term an “interest in politics”, which the authors define as the “first step to political engagement” (Manglos and Weinreb 2013, 200). In the Afrobarometer data, on which the analysis is premised, interest in politics is calculated on the basis of respondent’s answers to two questions: “*When you get together with your friends or family, would you say you discuss political matters frequently,*

*occasionally, or never?*”; and *“How interested would you say you are in public affairs?”* (Afrobarometer 2014). In light of my research experience, however, these questions are somewhat problematic, and in turn provoke the question: what exactly constitutes “public affairs” or “political issues”? For example, some of my young friends in Kitgum were keenly interested in dispute-settling processes within their clan or neighbourhood, in power struggles within their diocese or parish or in rumours and fears about the presence of witches in Kitgum. Most of these same young adults denied any particular interest in party politics or matters of the state. What might they have been expected to answer in the Afrobarometer questionnaire? Were they interested in public affairs?

According to a state-centric or party-political understanding of ‘politics’, or an early Habermasian understanding of the public sphere, none of the issues I mention above – neighbourhood courts, church politics or rumours – would count as political matters, or public affairs per se. Such state-centric perspectives have also been echoed in previous research on religion and politics in Africa. Much important scholarship has been produced about the institutional relations between political and religious elites (Gifford 1998; Ward 2005), the various divisive roles of religion (classic studies such as Clapham 1993; Laitin 1986; but also Cheney 2012), and how religious participation and education has contributed to the development of civic consciousness (Manglos and Weinreb, 2013; VonDoepp 2002).

More culturally oriented scholarship has sought to unpack the state-centricity of much analysis on religion and politics in Africa, expanding analysis beyond the ‘formal political sphere’. For instance, scholars have analysed the subversive nature of religious ritual and language in itself (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991; Ellis and Haar 2007), particularly that expressed in Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity (Gusman 2009; van Dijk 1992; Meyer 2011), and in gospel music (Bjerk 2005; Lamont 2010), while other scholars have analysed the important political role religious groups play as communal networks (Christiansen 2011; Englund 2011). Jones (2009; 2013) has suggested that to understand what creates meaningful social belonging and societal change in rural Africa, one should look beyond the state, while Englund (2011a), has suggested replacing sterile debates about the content and definition of ‘politics’ with analysis of how adherents draw on religion in their everyday lives, including in their political actions and thoughts. In this vein, Ross Wignall’s work has interpreted religion in Africa through a focus on how faith-based organizations seek to mould moral subjectivities and, in so doing, entrench neoliberal subjectivity among the targets of their youth work (Wignall 2016). In the case I present, as in the case described by Wignall, religion is not solely an arena for religious expression, but provides a space and platform from which young people can question

the authority of their elders, and advance critiques of the ill-functioning politics of the state. I thus build in this chapter on what Mahmood describes as the “longstanding feminist insight that any political transformation necessarily entails working on those embodied registers of life that are often cordoned off from the realm of ‘pure politics’” (Mahmood 2011, 34).

### Lost after War in Northern Uganda

The discourse on lost youth is widespread in Acholiland, and during the time I have spent in Kitgum town, I have regularly come across it in varied settings (see also Verma 2013; Vorhölter 2012; Vorhölter 2014). In certain ways, the Acholi discourse on youth is typical of discourses in which young people are collectively blamed for what are perceived as the ills of society (Diouf 2003). The fearful talk about ‘lost youth’ is, however, accentuated in particular ways in Acholiland, which was ravaged by a brutal war between the Ugandan government and the LRM/A from 1986 to 2006, during which the largely young rebel army attacked both government soldiers and traditional Acholi cultural institutions such as chiefs. Many of the abducted young rebels, who were themselves Acholi, were coerced into attacking their families and homes, but young people also joined the LRM/A voluntarily, and were often sympathetic to the rebels’ political aims (Finnström 2008). In light of the memory of rebellion in the region, public discourse on youth in post-war Acholiland oscillates between portraying them as vulnerable and traumatized victims of war and poverty, and as potentially dangerous disrupters of fragile societal peace. As shown in Cecilie Verma’s research, this sense of ambivalence and unpredictability is encapsulated in the Acholi concept of *lakite*, ‘somehow’, which is often used to describe the category of youth (Verma 2013).

Often, ‘lostness’ was attributed to the war, and to the materially, socially and psychologically distressing circumstances to which children were exposed during it. But these analyses by my informants did not relate ‘lostness’ simply to the experiences and subsequent behaviour of individual representatives of the ‘lost youth’. Rather, the ‘lostness’ of youth was a symptom of a general brokenness of social harmony (Porter 2013) in Acholi society, and of the breakdown of patterns of traditional, patriarchal and gerontocratic authority encapsulated within this idealized vision of harmonious co-existence (*ibid.*, see also Alava 2017a). The breakdown of traditional authority was a process that had begun prior to the war, but was further exacerbated by the LRM/A’s actions, and by what was broadly seen as the inadequacy of attempts by Acholi elders to deal with the war (Finnström 2006). To my young informants, the consequences

of this breakdown were evident everywhere around them: among their neighbours, their relatives, often their younger and sometimes older siblings and – for those working in education – among their students.

Rubangakene, a youth leader of a Catholic parish in Kitgum, who was trained in a Catholic seminary and currently worked as a university lecturer, described to me how Catholic youth programs had tried to help youth during the war.<sup>3</sup> The challenge, embedded as it was in the socio-economic structural realities of the war, was enormous:

The soldiers, they had lots of money, they were being paid well. Whereas in the camps, there was nothing. So there were lots of young girls with no money, and lots of soldiers with money. Almost all the girls were spoiled. And that is why we have such high HIV infection rates here – most of the soldiers were infected, because they had been moving around. And then there was the alcohol. For only 100 shillings you could buy a sachet, and these were strong! So you only needed three sachets and a young child, he was gone. They could lay a few bricks, get one hundred, and that was it. (Fieldwork notes)

Rubangakene explained how difficult it had been for the Christian youth leaders to convince their charges to spend their time watching character-building Catholic films, rather than the Western films of sex and violence that business-minded individuals presented at the displacement camps and in Kitgum town. Many young people had moved alone into the relative safety of the towns, or spent their nights at night commuter centres. To address this separation of children and youths from their families and clans, the church brought clan elders together to educate the young about their cultural traditions, but getting them to come and listen to the elders was a constant uphill struggle. Pressing his head in his hands in frustration, Rubangakene sighed, “Even up to these days, those problems are there.”

It was broadly agreed that heavy drinking reached new heights during the war, and the general opinion was that the use of alcohol had skyrocketed when sachets of potent liquor became available at low prices throughout the region. To a degree, the public discourse condemning alcohol abuse could be seen as an outcome of encounters with moralistic Christian narratives, since drinking had already been regarded as a serious problem for Africans by early missionaries (see e.g. Willis 1914). Drinking was seen as a critical societal challenge

3 All names in the chapter are pseudonyms. In the case of some informants, I have also chosen to conceal their gender and the church to which they belong in order to conceal identities.

in Acholiland, not only by the Protestants who frowned upon alcohol abuse in general, but also by the Catholics whose views on alcohol were more relaxed. For instance, in response to public pressure by Catholic clergy who had been lobbying on the topic for years, the sale of the cheapest sachets of non-standardized alcohol was banned in Kitgum district in 2015.<sup>4</sup> Many teachers mentioned that they had problems with sachets in schools, where even young students would be found with liquor in their pockets.

The second concern related to the standard of education in the region, and to the commitment by Acholi youth to schooling. While the introduction of Universal Primary Education in Uganda has increased the percentage of the young population attending school, it has also overloaded schools with more students than they can reasonably handle. Almost all Catholic schools, once considered of a high standard, have been obliged to take on all the students who sign up. With class sizes growing much faster than the schools' resources, everyone in Kitgum seemed to agree that the previously renowned Catholic schools had, under UPE and the significant pressure caused by almost two decades of war, seriously plummeted in quality (see also Higgins 2007). All parents with the financial means to do so sent their children to boarding schools in other parts of the country – often Kampala. This was seen as a huge problem, particularly among my Catholic acquaintances, since it was compounding the dilemma of the Acholi people: children were brought up by teachers in boarding schools rather than their parents and clans, surrounded by English and Luganda rather than their mother tongue and by Western or cultural influences, while their exposure to their own cultural heritage became limited to the Christmas vacation.

Although, as I describe below, efforts were made to tackle these problems, Rubangakene once suggested to me that that the problems of youth would only be overcome by a different generation – one not born and raised during the war (see also Vorhölter 2014, 199).

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4 Since much of the alcohol consumed in this region is home-brewed, there seems to be no quantitative data available on actual consumption rates. In any case, the omnipresence of empty *waragi* (gin) bags along streets in Kitgum, the commonplaceness of drunk men, more seldom women, and male youth drunk at all times of the day, as well as the prevalence of stories and complaints by people of all ages about alcohol misuse, did suggest that drinking was causing social unrest widely in the region. Interestingly, a recent study (Roberts et al. 2011) questions the widely spread official narrative of increased alcohol consumption in displacement camps. See Blattman's (2007) reflection on the relationship between alcohol consumption and humanitarian assistance, and the study by Kizza et al. (2012) of alcohol and suicide in post-conflict northern Uganda.

But these ones, it's very hard... The youth who went through the situation... this rebel what... They don't have character because they don't know actually what they do. Either they don't know, or they, they just find that life is what comes your way. Whatever comes your way is what you call life. So you find them here drinking, you find them there, they are dancing. Some do it because of frustration. They have lost their family members. Some they do it's a habit... because there was nothing contrary that they would hear... And up to now, if you get that age group, it is very hard to manage... Very hard. You find they're very hard to deal with. (Interview 2013)

A crucial point to make here concerns the particular understanding of 'lostness' in the context of the churches I studied. Being 'lost' has particular connotations in Christian discourse, where not being lost – as was one of the lost lambs of the biblical parable's shepherd – is to be found, and to be saved. In PCCs, emphasis is placed on spiritual salvation through a conscious choice to follow Christ, baptism by submersion (as opposed to the sprinkling used in the Protestant and Catholic Church), the receiving of gifts of the Holy Spirit, such as speaking in tongues and, subsequently, a morally upright life, whereby the 'saved' person refrains from sinful behaviour. As Gusman has shown, the notion of a "Joseph generation" of "saved" PCC Ugandan youth "proposes that a new, morally pure youthful generation will be able to reverse the moral corruption of the parental generation ... and will thus transform Ugandan society from within" (2009, 69).

There is an important difference in this PCC framing of 'lostness', and that employed by my informants: among the Catholic and Protestant communities I studied, being 'lost' was *not* framed as a primarily spiritual condition – and not as the opposite of being 'saved' in the sense implied by PCCs. There were certainly similarities between the PCC formulations described by Gusman above, and those of my Catholic and Protestant informants, in that both saw 'immoral' behaviour as an indication of 'lostness': namely, my informants associated 'lostness' with loose morals, disrespect for authority and a lack of what one of them termed "developmental thinking". But analysis of the root causes of 'lostness', and hence also of the means required to address it, were noticeably different. While PCCs conceptualize 'lostness' largely as a condition that can be fixed through the rejuvenation of an individual's relationship with God, among mainline churches 'lostness' was perceived as a condition that required the transformation and actions not only of an individual and of God, but of the entire community.



In the group discussion with which I opened this chapter, the only person to suggest spiritual salvation as a solution to 'lostness' was the young Pentecostal pastor. In contrast, for the Catholics and Protestants present in the discussion, as in numerous other discussions I had on the topic, the remedy for 'lostness' was presented in the *wang oo*, or evening fires where youth gather to learn from elders about 'Acholi tradition'. Elders and many youth in Acholi describe *wang oo*, with great nostalgia, as the tradition suspended for years during the war and is to this day largely lost in urban areas. For many main-line Christian youth, the solution for 'lostness' was thus not seen in moments of spiritual rapture, but in church communities, and those parts of Acholi tradition that were compatible with Christianity. Furthermore, the location where youth would be inculcated into the church and into tradition was the God-fearing and tradition-embracing family (Alava 2017a). Through resources transmitted by the church, tradition and "holy families" (ibid.), it would be possible to make sense of the violent past and to imagine and bring into being a more peaceful way of co-existence in the future. In contrast, without religion and tradition, war-affected Acholi youth were seen as destined to become lost: washed away and destroyed by the ills of modernity, by alcohol or drugs, or by the trauma of war.

If something was not done, my informants feared, all these lost Acholi youth would be unable to contribute to the civic, political or economic development of their region, their churches, or their nation. For instance, a 20-year-old Catholic woman, Sarah, lamented that with all their drinking, fornicating, never bothering to get up for weekday morning prayers and often even skipping prayers on Sunday, and wearing blouses that were too low-cut when they did come to pray, all these lost youth would never become good citizens. How would any of them be able to replace the current leaders and take the country towards something better, when they did not even know how to behave? Adopting a less moralistic tone, others, such as Rubangakene whom I mentioned above, analysed the failure of families, as well as Acholi cultural and religious institutions, to constructively steer what he referred to as the flow of youth towards productive ends: "Youth are like water," he declared. "It flows, and its flow needs to be directed" (fieldwork notes). Similarly, another Catholic man explained the necessity of authority to lost youth by stating, "Human beings need rules, otherwise chaos kicks in."

Much like what Mahmood (2011) has argued to be the logic of Muslim piety movements, submission and obedience to religious practices and authority – in some cases coupled with 'customary' practices and authority – was seen as conducive to the formation of better human beings, better institutions and, eventually, better politics. Before describing the ways in which my informants

suggested the flow of water should be directed, I briefly sketch the broader political context within which analyses of 'lostness' were set.

### Disillusionment with Politics

Early on in my fieldwork, while sipping a cold drink in the yard of the Bohma, the nicest hotel in Kitgum town, I asked Akena, a young Catholic woman, what people in Kitgum thought about places like this which had been established during the northern Ugandan war by members of the political and military elite, mainly to cater for the largely expatriate humanitarian staff who travelled to inspect the camps set up for internally displaced people. In many places, civilians were not displaced as a direct result of rebel attacks, but as part of the anti-insurgency tactics of the Ugandan army (Branch 2011; Dolan 2009; Finnström 2008). Akena began her answer by stating:

People think the leaders are corrupt, you know, embezzling funds, that sort of thing. The system in Uganda... It's complicated.

She went on to observe that some people were obviously benefiting from politics, explaining how annoyed people were about Museveni's decision to buy a fighter plane.

People are crying "but there's no war!" There is really high inflation, and the currency is being devalued, and he just buys a plane.

In contrast, she claimed, when the previous president, Milton Obote, had been in power, there had at least been accountability:<sup>5</sup>

Obote came to show the receipts – he made sure people knew where the money was going. But with Museveni, there's nothing. But there's nothing we can do. We have no voice. We have no voice.

I stayed quiet for a moment, and then said, "But you elect them!" which made Akena smile. After a moment's pause, she continued:

5 Milton Obote was president of Uganda from 1966–1971 and again from 1981–1985. His second regime was followed by the brief presidency of the Acholi general Tito Okello, who was deposed by the current president, Yoweri Museveni, in 1986.

But people say, the ones they have elected, they are wrong. Some benefit, sure. But now, most people are just tired. And the elections for us here, also...

Her laughter trailed off in a way that signalled she had nothing more to say on the subject. Months later she brought up the topic of elections again, explaining that they were good for nothing, since all the votes were bought. Even her friends and relatives had “received envelopes” containing money from ruling party politicians in the run-up to the election and, as others also later explained to me, many were willing to “give Museveni a little” in the election, since he was willing to “give them a little” in the run-up to the vote.<sup>6</sup> Almost everyone I knew expressed sympathy for one or more of the leading opposition politicians – many of whom were themselves Acholi – and expressed the wish that the political leadership in Uganda would finally change after 27 years of Museveni’s rule. Yet in the 2011 elections which, while flawed, were still considered an improvement on previous elections, Museveni had secured stronger support in the north than ever before (EU EOM 2011; Titeca and Onyango 2012); even in the 2016 elections, although support for the NRM dipped a little in Acholiland, indicating increased frustration with the government’s inability to deliver on promises, the ruling regime were victorious (Vokes and Wilkins, 2017).

Museveni’s regime in Uganda has been characterized by the instrumental blending of liberal elements into what is in fact a semi-authoritarian regime (Tripp 2010; Goodfellow 2014), creating a situation where there is no level playing field from which the political opposition could launch any genuine alternative to the current regime (Titeca and Onyango 2012). As one young friend put it when reading an early draft of this chapter: “NRM *is* the government.” The majority of stories and commentaries that I heard about politics in Kitgum were steeped in cynicism, apathy, ridicule or annoyance. Many of my actively practising Catholic informants in particular indicated that it would be impossible for them to engage with party politics, because doing politics would require them to sell their principles: to start lying, deceiving and playing games. As a teenage altar boy explained to me, “Most politicians are liars. They will come and say they’re Christians, but they don’t do good things.” Thus, he concluded, “It is better to be a bishop than a politician. Because as a politician, you might make a promise, but once you would have that power, you would

6 Writing of the 2011 elections, Titeca and Onyango note that a widely held perception in Uganda was that “while the 2006 elections were flooded with violence, the 2011 elections were flooded with money” (Titeca and Onyango 2012, 128).

forget all about it" (fieldwork notes, March 2013). Since there was little faith in formal politics, any efforts put into advancing things considered worthy were seen as better placed in other spheres of life.

### **Bringing in the Lost**

Within the context of the churches I studied, attempts to address lostness were identifiable at both an institutional and individual level: the churches, as institutions, were investing in education, individual Catholic and Protestant youth were investing heavily in moulding their own characters, while both churches and youth sought to contribute in various ways to building the character of the 'lost youth' within their sphere of influence.

With the lead of the Catholic Archbishop of Gulu and the retired Protestant Bishop of Kitgum, Acholi religious leaders had taken it upon themselves to intervene in what was seen as the downward spiral of Acholi youth towards a state of lostness. Alongside their sermons and youth outreach programs for educating Christian youth and directing them towards decent lifestyles, they were lobbying heavily for investments in education by individual expatriate Acholis and willing donors. Because the government was not seen to be investing in education in the region, it was considered of paramount importance to invest in it privately. The more resource-endowed Catholic Church had started systematically investing in building up private educational institutions: the Archbishop Flynn Senior Secondary School in Pader, established in 2009, produced the highest academic results in the northern region with its first class of graduates, and thus provided a viable alternative to sending children away from Acholiland. According to the school's principal, a priest, its success was largely a consequence of its commitment to moulding the character of their students:

You know in the camps people were living just next to each other. It was just dirty, you could not clean yourself; you did not clean the toilet; all these things, nobody cared. So now, we teach the youth about caring about the environment. About having trees, about keeping places clean. We tell them that you wash yourself, you cut your hair, you dress appropriately, you brush your teeth. So that when you are sitting next to a person, it is also comfortable for them. I talk to them about greetings, about good manners and politeness. They say we are disturbing them, but soon they see the point. By the end of the first term, parents say they are acting differently.

Fieldwork notes, March 2013

The younger parish youth in particular whom I interviewed, both in the Catholic and the Protestant Church, observed that participating in the activities of the church had helped them, and continued to help them, to behave properly, a sentiment Vorhölter (2014) also encountered among youth who participated in so-called cultural groups. As one Protestant senior-six graduate explained to me:

Joining the choir also changed my life because you know as a youth there is evil ways you know... So if you join choir that time when you are doing all those things, you will be free of doing those other things – the evil things, you know. (Interview, March 2013)

The young man was the child of a person of considerable standing within this church. The pressure to conform to the expectations of how a decent Christian youth should behave were thus great, and taking part in the activities of the church, and associating with active members of the parish, assisted in living up to these expectations. A somewhat similar sentiment was expressed to me by the 12–15-year-old altar servants at the Catholic Church, who explained that they were drawn to become altar servants because they had seen the effect on other young people: “They were doing charitable works, like helping the disabled. I liked their ways, because it changed your heart to become a good child, so that you do not miss prayers” (Interview, April 2013). Through their service to the church, the boys explained, they had learned smartness, discipline and respect. The Catholic and Protestant young people who volunteered their time for church youth activities had found a way of becoming ‘good Christians’ and ‘good people’ and, through so doing, of coming to terms with, and scraping a living for their family amidst, the precarious circumstances of post-war Acholiland. In sum, in the absence of a formal politics inspiring belief that Uganda as a whole might become ‘less lost’ under the present government, my informants focused on not being lost themselves: on building their own lives, and the lives of their children, as best as they might in the constricted possibilities granted to them.

It was sometimes suggested to me that it was in fact in the interests of the ruling political elite that young people were lost – whether to booze, HIV/AIDS, pop music or betting agencies – as they would not protest in ways that might threaten the political establishment. They would not be in the right state of mind – nor possess the necessary political, educational or social skills – to pose such a threat. Those previous generations who had been part of the LRM/A had of course posed a serious threat to stability. But the LRM/A was certainly not seen as a role model or ideal future trajectory by many of those young

adults who had spent years of their life walking each night to displacement camps and town centres in search of safety from rebel attacks and abductions. From this perspective then, the project of parish youth in northern Uganda to express their aspirations in choir practise or youth gatherings, and to improve themselves through education and volunteer jobs, as well as their ambition to assist other young people around them to do the same, can be read as an inherently political project.

### Conservative Conformism or Political Agency?

The case I have presented contributes two general perspectives to discussions on African youth and politics. First of all, by introducing a group of mainline Christian young adults, I focus on a group that is seldom written about in studies of young Africans. There are, arguably, many more young adults in Uganda who take an active role in the lives of their churches than there are those who engage in civil society activism or party politics. The geography they inhabit is not the “geography of the streets” that Diouf (2003, 15) argues African youth has occupied so as to escape “the logics of public and administrative control, communitarian perceptions and state surveillance”. Rather, the space of the churches that they choose to inhabit is a public space that is broadly considered socially and morally acceptable, and that is governed by often notable administrative and ecclesial control. Rather than radical and as such dangerous or inspiring, depending on one’s reading of it, these young people can be described as conservative conformists.

The second point to be drawn from this case is that while they are actively practising Christians, they are *not* so in the way of members of charismatic churches, the growth of which has been documented all over Africa. While Acholi youth also increasingly attend these new and lively churches, old mission churches continue to attract enormous numbers of young people and adults to participate weekly in their activities. The solution of mainline Christian youngsters to the lostness of youth – and to the decadence and suffering in society – is not the Holy Spirit and a complete rupture with the past and with preceding generations (see, e.g., Gusman 2009). In fact, rather than advocating a complete break with the past, many young Catholics and Protestants were hesitant about what they called “*savedee*” churches, which advocated a radical break and condemnation of Acholi traditional practices, and felt these churches were disturbing the peace and causing even further confusion. Rather, what many young Catholics and Protestants saw as the solution to lostness of youth and society alike was the revival of Acholi culture, combined

with deepened commitment to the churches introduced to Acholiland by missionaries a century earlier. For them, a (re)turn to the church and tradition provided alternatives to the confusion of contemporary society, to the violent solutions previously advocated by rebellious youth in northern Uganda and the formal politics of the state and political parties.

Yet both these arguments come with an important caveat. For while churches and tradition were seen as the solution to which these young people were prone to turn, their relationships to both 'tradition' and to their churches were ambivalent. Some hovered between their old churches and Pentecostal-Charismatic churches; others between their churches' official doctrine about Acholi clan practice and their own or their families' views. As one friend put it: "We [urban youth] are striving to find a balance. And it will take a while." And while the official narrative in Kitgum, to which they subscribed, was that the revival of clan tradition and the authority of elders was a positive development, in practice they were often resistant to, and critical of, the expectations their clan relatives, and their elders, had of them – for instance regarding their duty to perform customary funeral rites for their deceased relatives.

As Christiansen writes of parish youth in rural Eastern Uganda (Christiansen 2011), those in Kitgum often criticized older generations for failing to provide them with the financial and emotional support they needed. For this group, the churches – and the foreign missionaries of the Catholic Church in particular – provided crucially important alternative support networks. Years of attendance at these churches had of course profoundly influenced their ways of seeing themselves and the world. To find spaces within church hierarchies, church youth were obliged, to an extent at least, to subscribe to the official discourse deployed by the churches about 'lost' Acholi youth. But these young adults were not simply blindly bending to clerical authority. For instance, none of my young informants who had families had been married in church (Alava 2017a), despite both the Catholic and Protestant Churches strongly pressuring their members to do so. Young people openly judged clergy on the extent to which they facilitated and supported their taking on active roles in the churches. Moreover, they were actively and often publically – through their activities as choir members, voluntary preachers, members of churches' decision-making bodies and as educators of other members of their age cohort – seeking to mould the ways in which youth were viewed by other members of society (see Christiansen 2011).

For those active young Catholics and Protestants on whom I have focused in this analysis, the 'lost youth' were those who had given up trying to move forward and grow into respectable adults. In contrast, my informants sought a balance between the alternative and often competing moral, political,

social and spiritual realms in ways that would maximize both their individual well-being (in terms of income, building up their good character and beneficial connections) as well as broader communal and societal development and peaceful co-existence. As Mahmood has argued,

[The exercise of freedom] turns not only on the ability to distance oneself from the social, but also, more importantly, on the capacity to turn one's gaze critically to reflect upon oneself in order to determine the horizon of possibilities and strategies through which one acts upon the world.

MAHMOOD 2011, 150

I argue that mainline Christian Acholi youth were taking part in this ultimately political project through the ways in which they analysed and responded to the 'lostness' of their peers. But this was not a straightforward task: expanding the concept of *hustling*, in which the young informants of Mats Utas engaged in their everyday business of survival in Free Town in Sierra Leone (Christensen, Utas and Vium 2013), one might suggest that my informants were engaged in a type of hustling between alternative moral, political, social and spiritual realms. This hustling – taking on an active role in their churches, families and communities, and aiming to put the different contradictory pieces and demands of life together to make a coherent enough whole – appeared as the antipode to being lost.

## Conclusion

The urgency with which concerns are raised in public arenas and in private encounters in Acholiland about youth being 'lost' and in need of saving can be interpreted as a manifestation of what Diouf (2003) has referred to as the moral and social panic raised by the upsurge of youth in Africa to the cracks of state and society. Yet while the lost youth discourse can in part be interpreted as a moral panic, I argue that in Acholiland it is simultaneously a political discourse *about* the cracks of state and society. Acholi sub-region has some of the highest poverty, unemployment and HIV infection rates in Uganda, while the education outcomes in the sub-region are among the worst. The belief that Acholi youth are 'lost' is hence not only a discourse that serves to disempower youth and entrench gerontocratic hegemony, but an assessment of the material, social and political realities that Acholi youth face.

Stories about the lost youth of Acholi and how to restore them distil the essence of what is not working in Acholi society and in Uganda; they can thus



be viewed as political narratives that “engage the imagination, not only in constructing stories about the past and the present, but in helping to articulate a vision of an alternative world” (Andrews 2014, 87). Along similar lines, Mahmood writes:

If the ability to effect change in the world and in oneself is historically and culturally specific (both in terms of what constitutes ‘change’ and the means by which it is effected), then the meaning and sense of agency cannot be fixed in advance, but must emerge through an analysis of the particular concepts that enable specific modes of being, responsibility and effectivity. Viewed in this way, what may appear to be a case of deplorable passivity and docility from a progressivist point of view, may actually be a form of agency – but one that can be understood only from within the discourses and structures of subordination that create the conditions of its enactment. (2011, 13–14)

Agency is not present only in *resistance* to norms, but in how norms are *inhabited* (ibid.). The key question is, therefore: what are the conditions under which Catholic and Protestant youth in Kitgum come to desire to submit to the recognized authority of clan elders and their churches? As I hope this chapter has shown, what is central for understanding this desire is the discourse of *lostness*, to which clan tradition and the Christian Church are seen to provide an antidote. The choice to submit made by young Catholics and Protestants in Kitgum – like those of the pious Muslim women studied by Mahmood – run counter to what she terms “a progressivist point of view” (ibid.). Yet, as I have shown, the partial submission of these young adults to the authority of the church also provides them with spaces and languages of agency which they can only dream about in the sphere of formal politics or, indeed, almost anywhere else in the context of the society they inhabit.

The discourse of ‘lostness’ has a deeply moralizing tone, and I think it can rightly be critiqued for denigrating and even depoliticizing the youth it labels as ‘lost’. As I have shown, however, the discourse also reflects genuine concerns that elders have about the youth of their communities, and that ‘not-lost’ young adults have about their peers. When combined with a political critique of church and clan elders who are not doing enough to enable Acholi youth to rise, or with a critique of the central state that is perpetuating the marginalization of this group in Uganda, the discourse on ‘lostness’ becomes a potent political tool. Furthermore, for those young adults who adopt the discourse of ‘lost youth’, and who create themselves in opposition to it, the discourse produces a form of agency through which they seek to constitute themselves as meaningful and constructive members of their society.

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