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Alice Lakwena and the Holy Spirit Movement

***Introduction***

Alice Lakwena and the Holy Spirit Movement attempted to reintegrate soldiers into Acholi society and discipline them. Acholi elders and *rwodi* were an ineffective means to reintegrate Acholi soldiers because the colonial experience rendered them powerless. Alice Lakwena’s grassroots movement not only reintegrated Acholi soldiers into society, but also reconnected them to their traditional past.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The HSM clashed with the NRA and the UPDM/A rebels on many occasions and became known as the “army of heaven”, while the UPDM/A were known as the “army of earth”. The distinction derives from the heavy influences of Catholicism Acholi in the movement. The Acholi loved Alice because her message was one of love, redemption, and unity beyond ethnic divisions. The HSM moved beyond the borders of Acholiland towards the south. While the HSM wanted to include non-Acholi members in the movement, southern ethnic groups viewed their presence as a threat. The HSM presence reminded many people of the Acholi soldiers that massacred many people in central and southern Acholi. To the vast majority of Ugandans, the Acholi members were northern invaders.[[2]](#footnote-2)

This paper examines the spirit Lawkena’s possession of Alice Auma by analyzing the history of spirit possession in East Africa and Uganda specifically. The purpose of this analysis is to make clear that Alice’s conceptualization of her reality and the mechanisms she used to confront it are deeply rooted in African traditional religious practices. While many consider her tactics to be irrational, this paper will explore them as non-rational means to alter her environment through her acts of resistance. This will also include a gender analysis of spirit mediumship, as the type of spirit mediumship Alice utilized is traditionally specific to women. Thus, the HSM was more than a resistance movement. It was an attempt to reify women’s positions in Acholiland by incorporating acts that historically elevated their status but were challenged through colonialism and nationalism.

***Spirit Mediumship in Africa***

In order to understand the importance of spirit mediumship to Alice Auma and the HSM, one must understand the historical significance of the practice in East Africa as a whole. Historically, gender shapes religious expression and power within certain groups, which contributes to the group’s overall popular consciousness. *Kubandwa* spirit mediumship provides a great point of analysis for this, as the practice influenced spirit mediumship among the Acholi. For practitioners of *kubandwa,* mediumship, gender, politics, and prophecy are intertwined under the basic theme of generativity and fertility. Scholars of East African religions typically assume male authority as the norm for East African religious practices, which fails to interrogate male power.[[3]](#footnote-3)

In *kubandwa,* women are the predominant authority figures with spirit mediumship being the language for local daily life. Motherhood is attached to mediumship because of the respect it demands in African societies. Women are initiated into spirit mediumship, usually due to illness or fertility issues. During the initiation, they symbolically die and are reborn into their family. Therefore, birth and generativity at heart of initiation. In places where the hierarchy of power was controlled by a small number of cattle keeping aristocrats, women had less control and influence than men in their own class.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Initiation into *kubandwa* allowed women to gain sociopolitical influence in a patrilocal, patrilineal society. *Kubandwa* provides women with counterhegemonic voice by centering women’s control over their own fertility and reproduction. Women also represent the continuity of tradition at times, specifically priestesses. In northern Uganda, around Buganda and Toro, priests and priestesses practiced a more democratic version of spirit mediumship prior to colonization. Priestesses had influence over politics and religion. They oversaw the construction of important sites and were revered by kings/chiefs, particularly those permanently possessed by spirits. Their power was still linked to reproduction, life, and generativity.[[5]](#footnote-5)

During the precolonial period, the Cwezi were the main practitioners of *kubandwa*. The last Cwezi dynastic period marks drastic changes to the organization of deities and the practice itself. During this time, a separation of “black” vs “white” deities and male/female deities occurred. Male deities were considered Cwezi while were females not. The Cwezi also grouped deities with others that they were not grouped with previously. This was most likely in response to the perceived threat of centralized rule imposed by other rulers in central and southern Uganda. These changes made women’s religious traditions secondary to men, including spirit mediumship.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Women who practiced *kubandwa* in northern Ugandastill retained a great deal of local authority in certain places such as Bunyoro, which still held *kubandwa* in high regard while centralizing power that undercut lineage based authority. Women spirit mediums in the south had less influence because lineage heads retained a great deal of power. While historians argue that the rise of states had negative impact on women’s positions in society in Africa, the importance of lineage heads influenced their positions as well. In places where there was more centralized authority like Burundi, *kubandwa* was nationally recognized, which weakened women’s influence because the spirits lacked attachment to lineages. The only power recognized was connection with reproduction, life, generativity. [[7]](#footnote-7)

Women initiates in *Kubandwa* in Northern Rwanda/southern Uganda began affiliating with other religions in the late 19th to early 20th centuries as *kubandwa* became increasingly attached to centralized power/national ideology. The most prominent group were priestesses of Nyabingi in southwestern Uganda. Nyabingi (closely associated with *kubandwa)* was the deity form of Queen Kitami. It was closely associated with fertility until the late 19th Century when more men became Nyabingi priests, many of which were prominent members of their lineages. They used their priesthood to assert authority within lineage groups, so Nyabingi became associated with the power of traditional households and lineage elders. *Kubandwa* and Nyabingi worship provided women with various forms of ceremonial and political positions of authority in the midst of rapid changes. Women in northwestern Uganda, for example, could occupy positions of priestly power equal to men.[[8]](#footnote-8) *Kubandwa* “provided a continuing language of political and religious authority that was accessible to men and women” even as power became centralized.[[9]](#footnote-9)

***Spirit Possession and Nature***

The Acholi see themselves as victims of their environment. Rather than looking at illness or misfortune as caused by a lack of something, they see it as a cause of being filled with something. Illnesses is thought to be caused by possession of evil spirit. The spirit has to be removed before others are infected, so entire community becomes consumed with performing rituals to drive the evil out. Spirits exist within nature, so they are always present and manifested in animals, rocks, tress, and other parts of nature.[[10]](#footnote-10) In small societies, spirit possessions are understood in terms of social psychology. In smaller communities, possession is thought to occur in times of social change to release tension.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Nature is important to the Acholi, specifically its connection to the spirit world. The wilderness and domestic life are in separate domains, which means they often conflict with each other. Spirits, or *jogi*, live near rocks, water, and mountains. Women were thought to be exposed to *jogi* when collecting water or other natural resources during the precolonial and colonial periods. If a *jogi* possession caused a woman to fall ill, she would seek a healer, or *ajakwa*, to rid her of it. If that *ajakwa* was not successful, that woman would be initiated as an *ajakwa* to learn how to domesticate the *jogi.[[12]](#footnote-12)*

During the precolonial period, the chief *(rwot)* and the priest *(won ngom)* used the power of their *jogi* to encourage fertility and well-being. The *ajakwa* of the free *jogi* used their power for witchcraft and sorcery to harm people. The Acholi blamed *jogi* and impure Acholi for misfortune in Acholiland because nature and humans were connected in a continuum. Nature represented a plurality of independent powers, *jogi* and their mainly women mediums mediating between nature and humans. The wilderness belonged to *rwot,* and he was responsible for performing certain rituals for purification and reconciliation to keep balance between nature and humans. If any part of nature was killed, be it animal or human, the Acholi had to sacrifice a human or animal spirit or nature would retaliate. Civil War in Acholi disturbed this process because they could not carry out the necessary purification rituals and nature was constantly threatened. Colonialism disturbed this process, thereby disturbing the ecology of the environment. The rituals and mutual respect for nature preserved the land before colonialism. Stripping the *rwot* of his power pushed religious and moral duties to the background, which threatened the environment. [[13]](#footnote-13)

***African Religion, Tradition, and Catholicism***

Alice Auma was a self-proclaimed “prophetess of god”, a supernaturally chosen messiah for the Acholi. President Museveni, the NRA, and Ugandan government were thought of as an external evil threat that should be eradicated through rituals. These rituals derived from a marriage of Catholicism, African Traditional religions, and Luo traditional political and cultural norms and values. Catholics were also a marginalized group in Uganda, which was mainly Anglican. Alice used this to recruit for the HSM because she was Roman Catholic***.*** Her mission was to cleanse Acholi and save it from foreign invaders, but the invaders were not actually foreign since they were other Ugandans.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Alice was uneducated in both Christianity and African traditions, so her teachings came from heavenly revelations and visions in which she interpreted as a new understanding of God. She ultimately wanted to rid Uganda and the world of evil, secular governments and establish a divine theocracy that the Pope presided over. She told her “holy warriors” that prayer and holy water made them bulletproof. This was a holy war where Alice and her followers were tasked with exorcising the Devil from foreign invaders, who were the physical soldiers for Satan, to Northern Uganda through the spirit Lakwena. These holy warriors were only armed with *moya* (holy oil) and *Maji* (holy water).[[15]](#footnote-15)

This spiritual warfare was the Acholi cultural style of *mat oput* (holy justice, punishment, and reconciliation). Holy warriors who died in battle were considered holy sacrifices, *gitum/gityer,* and holy atonements for sins*, Tum.* HSMF were commissioned by Alice in 1987 as the military wing of the movement. They were to protect the HSM, but were not armed with anything more than rituals, holy oil, and holy water. Alice prophesized that God would protect the HSMF in battle, but they were ultimately slaughtered because of a lack of military training.[[16]](#footnote-16)

***The Journey to Paraa***

There are two stories of Alice’s journey to Paraa, which is the founding myth of the Holy Spirits Movement and the Holy Spirits Mobile Forces. The first story is of Lakwena leading Alice and her father to Paraa to commune with the animals, mountains, and water. The Christian God ordered Lakwena to review the water and the animals, which told Lakwena of man’s evil nature. God then gave Lakwena the power to cure diseases at Mount Kilak. Alice’s father, Saverino, sacrificed a lamb to the Lord to atone for the sins of the Acholi and stop the war in Acholiland. Lakwena then possessed Alice to heal people through her and stationed Alice at Opit.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Saverino’s version of the story tells of Lawkena ordering him to find the servant (Alice) in Opit, who was fasting for 40 days. He went to her and she agreed to go to Paraa to ask the water about the sins on earth and reasons for bloodshed. Alice wore skin of a civet cat, which was common for *ajwakas*. Lakwena asked the animals if they were responsible for the bloodshed in Acholiland, and they denied it. Alice and her Saverino went to the water and asked it and the animals of the water about the sins and bloodshed, and found them not at fault either as they had wounds as well. They then travelled to the fall to ask who was responsible for bloodshed, and the falls blamed people. Water told Alice to fight the sinners and told Saverino to bring sacrifices to appease the dead, including red sheep and silver coins.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Alice and Saverino went to water’s brother, the rock, and an earthquake happened as a welcoming. They prayed with Lakwena, and God revealed healing water near the rock. Rock agreed to give them the water to heal injuries and sickness, but wanted them to fight for sins in return. The two returned to water three times and sacrificed sheep on third visit, marking the creation of a new world. During the final trip to the water, Alice stayed to fast for forty days,. During this time, Lakwena possessed Alice for two of those days and used her to protect the railway driver from the United People’s Democratic Army soldiers when they shot at him. The bullets bounced off of Alice, which inspired soldiers to ask Alice for spiritual support.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Alice remained in Opit to heal people until August 6th, 1986, when Lakwena ordered her to form the HSFM to fight evil: Yoweri Museveni, impure soldiers, witches, and sorcerers. She cleansed soldiers in complex ritual, and Lakwena promised to protect them as long as they followed the 20 Holy Spirit Safety Precautions, which were issued by Lakwena. The HSFM fought using only the Holy Spirit Tactic. For this, Alice was possessed by Lawkena and/or other spirits that instructed the soldiers on where and how to fight before battle. In October 1987, the HSMF successfully battled in Lira, Soroti, Mbale, and Tororo to Busoga before National Resistance Army defeated them. Alice and some of her followers fled to Kenya where she remained until her death.[[20]](#footnote-20)

***The Journey as a Juridical Crisis***

Reinhart Koselleck defines a juridical crisis as “a decision in the sense of administering justice and judging, in a manner properly termed critique.”[[21]](#footnote-21) Behrand uses this definition to provide context for how Alice created the HSMF in a moment of crisis in Northern Uganda. Acholi soldiers of the Uganda National Liberation Army, once led by Idi Amin, returned to Acholi after the National Resistance Army defeated them at Kitgum and Gulu in March of 1986. They tried to live as peasants but found it difficult to adjust to that lifestyle as their time in the UNLA allowed them to plunder wealth from others. Acholi elders attempted to reintroduce them to Acholi life using *Acholi macon* (Acholi tradition), but this was not effective.[[22]](#footnote-22)

The NRA’s new battalion, the Federal Democratic Movement of Uganda, now stationed in Acholi, started violently attacking Acholi citizens. Former Acholi soldiers joined the Uganda People’s Democratic Army to resist the NRA’s presence in Acholi. Many believed the NRA and the Ugandan government were conspiring to kill all Acholi men. The UPDA successfully fought the NRA because of their knowledge of the terrain. However, the UPDA also targeted Acholi peasants who did not support the with material goods and housing. Ultimately, the UPDA could not completely defeat the NRA, and many soldiers returned to their villages and continued attacking peasants.[[23]](#footnote-23)

During this time, Lakwena possessed Alice Auma while she was in Opit acting as a healer with the HSM. He told her to stop healing efforts in Opit and to form the Holy Spirits Mobile Forces by recruiting Acholi soldiers from the UPDA to wage war against evil. While doing this, Alice was also able to convince guerilla groups within the UPDA to join the HSMF as well. Most of these soldiers were internal strangers in Acholi due to their long military careers in the NRA and UPDA, so the HSMF also served the purpose of reintegrating and rehabilitating them.[[24]](#footnote-24)

Many Acholi believed witchcraft was the cause of the violence in Acholi. Rather than blaming the NRA for the deaths of so many soldiers and peasants, the Acholi blamed *kiroga*, a form of witchcraft practiced internally and associated with spirit possession that is used to take revenge on others. If a soldier was killed, it was not the enemy’s bullet that killed him, but rather another Acholi used *kiroga* against him and that led the bullets to him. The same rationale was used to explain why HIV/AIDS spread so rapidly during this time. So, while the Acholi acknowledged the NRA as an external threat, the real threat was internal through witchcraft. Thus, the mission of Alice and the HSMF was not just to rid Acholi of the NRA presence, but also to cease the practice of witchcraft. Witchcraft created a great deal of tension within Acholi, so lots of discord. Lots of hatred toward witches, but also a great deal of fear so no one would directly challenge them.[[25]](#footnote-25)

Acholi elders blamed the impurity of the Acholi soldiers for the increasing unrest and witchcraft in Acholi. Soldiers that fought in World War I and II, as well as those who participated in the NRA, UNLA, and UPDA, brought *cen* back to Acholi, which are the vengeful spirits of their victims. During the precolonial era, soldiers that came returned from battle had to undergo a seven-day purification ritual to appease the dead before they could re-enter Acholi. Hand to hand contact made this possible, as the soldiers would know the identities of the person they killed and could, therefore, appease their spirit. However, modern weapons made performing this ritual nearly impossible because a soldier could kill many people at once and from a distance. Therefore, he would not know the person he killed, so many *cen* came into Acholi. Acholi elders believed modern warfare tactics rendered many of their purification rituals useless. A culture of distrust developed between Acholi soldiers and other Acholi citizens because the soldiers brought *cen* into Acholi and performed misdeeds while in the army. The increase of *cen* in Acholi attributed to the increase in witchcraft, which contributed to unnatural deaths, illness, war, and drought. Ultimately, the Acholi felt they were being punished for the sins of the soldiers. [[26]](#footnote-26)

The juridical crisis in Acholi was both an external and internal issue. On one hand, the Ugandan government, Musevini, and the NRA were responsible for the physical threat to the Acholi. However, because of the Acholi’s reverence for nature and spirits, they conceptualized the external threat as the result of the internal threat of witchcraft. Alice’s movement was significant because Lakwena addressed both threats through Alice. Evil was anything foreign to Acholi, which included Acholi soldiers who separated themselves from their traditions.

***The Eroticism of Spirit Mediumship***

Audre Lorde’s *Uses of the Erotic* explores the notion of the erotic being a source of power and information. Traditionally, women are taught that suppressing the erotic is a source of strength, which Lorde asserts as illusory because of its ties to male models of power. As such, we also learn to suppress and distrust the knowledge that comes from nonrational places. She is arguing for the use of the erotic as a beneficial tool for women.[[27]](#footnote-27)

Lorde argues that women are taught to suppress the erotic in every aspect of our lives except for sex, which also strips the erotic of its power. We separate the erotic from our work, so women do not love what we do and do what we love. To experience the erotic is to experience “an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced the fullness of this depth of feeling and recognizing its power, in honor of self-respect we can require no less of ourselves.” Essentially, she is arguing that once women experience the erotic, particularly beyond the act of sex, they will strive to maintain the feelings it produces within us in all aspects of our lives. The erotic, when used as a tool, will empower women to demand the most out of every aspect of our lives.[[28]](#footnote-28)

Applying the theory of the erotic to Alice Auma allows for an exploration of spirit mediumship as an erotic practice. As a medium, Alice was able to confront the crisis in her homeland in a non-rational way. Rather than allowing the influence of European Enlightenment that permeated Africa throughout colonization to inform her, Auma centered what many colonists framed as an irrational practice to make sense of her environment and change it as a traditional medium would. For example in *kubandwa,* spirit mediums were attached to motherhood, gender, politics, and prophecy under the basic theme of generativity and fertility. As a medium, Alice in a sense aimed to rebirth Acholi through her recruitment of Acholi soldiers and communing with nature. The soldiers became foreigners through their military service, so Alice had to “give birth” to them by way of initiation rituals into the HSMF.

Alice also experienced a rebirth as Lakwena chose her to be his medium. Once she became his vessel, her sociopolitical status elevated to that of a leader in a traditionally patrilocal, patrilineal society. She was both a mother of a movement and the embodiment of Acholi traditions and Christianity. Rather than engage Acholi soldiers with scripture and traditional Acholi fables, Lakwena used Alice’s body to perform what an Acholi should be at that time.

In the myth of the Journey to Paraa, Alice reportedly fasted for forty days in Opit. This story closely resembles that of Moses, who fasted on the mountain for forty days and nights while writing the Ten Commandments. Similarly, after her fast, her father, Servino, sacrifices a lamb to the Lord to atone for the sins of the Acholi. While Alice was not formally educated in missionary run schools, her story mirroring that of Moses is no coincidence considering her devotion to Christianity prior to her spirit possession. The myth is a symbolic marriage of her connection to *ajwaka* practices and the Christian faith.

Alice’s journey also marked a restoration of the intimate connection the Acholi maintained with nature traditionally. Lisa Lowe uses intimacy as tool to analyze connections between people and geographic locations in her analysis of Europe, Asia, North America in the 18th and 19th centuries. She is problematizing the historical separation of rational thought from the intimate, which echoes Lorde’s assertion of the erotic being a sight of non-rational thought.[[29]](#footnote-29) For Alice’s movement, restoring the intimate connections between the Acholi and nature were most important, as these connections restored balance and protected life. For example, water was an integral part of the HSFM’s ability to battle and was also responsible for Lawkena’s possession of Alice, as possession always occurred at site of water. Alice taught soldiers to revere and fear water by performing rituals in or near water, thereby restoring their intimate connection to their traditions as their elders tried to do.

Alice’s mediumship also elevated her to the status of a *rwot* at a time when that position was stripped of most of its significance because of a growing centralized power. Just as the *rwot* was charged with performing certain rituals that encouraged life and longevity, so to do Alice perform rituals for her soldiers and Acholi as a whole. She thought of herself not as just a leader for the Acholi but the world as well. She was able to exercise this power at a time when lineage heads no longer enjoyed their traditional influence in Acholi sociopolitical life, which was evident in the elders’ inability to reincorporate Acholi soldiers into society.

A final point to make relates to Alice’s relationship with her soldiers. These soldiers recognized Alice’s supernatural powers through Lakwena and felt encouraged to join her despite the rift between them and their own traditions. Her mediumship combined with a seemingly militaristic strategy, though nonviolent, created a space conducive to Acholi soldiers establishing intimate connections with nature, each other, and Alice. This intimacy also allowed them to reestablish themselves among the general Acholi population in a nonthreatening manner. They were no longer a threat because Alice “gave birth” to them, thereby ridding them of *cen*. Alice’s erotic performance of mediumship served to restore balance in nature among living creatures and inanimate objects.

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