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Poisoning at the periphery: allocating responsibility across the Uganda/South Sudan borderlands

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents ethnographic evidence from three sites across the Uganda/South Sudan borderlands. At each location, procedures to identify alleged poisoners were documented. Novel voting processes were initiated by hybrid local authorities. Addressing widespread anxiety about proximate wrong-doing seemed to promote order locally. In this paper, we discuss similarities between locations and review what constitutes poison. Descriptions of indigenous electoral processes are then provided. We reveal the contested nature of accountability, responsibility and democracy at the intersection of the spiritual ontologies and codified law. We argue that hybrid constellations of authority operate along different logics than those of development experts.

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Introduction

Across the borderlands of South Sudan and Uganda, the insecurities and injustices occurring in everyday life collapse those divisions between the material and spiritual, the visible and invisible and the living and the dead that form the basic assumptions of Cartesian ontology. In this region, not all dangers are visible – indeed, many of the worst are not – and beliefs in witchcraft, poisonings and the manifestations of the effects of malevolent spiritual forces are widespread. According to Evans-Pritchard’s famous distinction between the sorcerer and the witch, a witch is somebody whose magical powers are inherent within their person while a sorcerer uses external, physical means or tools to cause harm.¹ And poisoning, whether of the material or magical variety, is sorcery in its almost archetypal form. Moreover, in this region of Africa, it is widely supposed that ‘bad feelings’ such as anger, envy and jealousy can result in interpersonal violence with a magical origin. Furthermore, as jealousy is considered a near-universal human emotion as well as a common motive for action, cases of poisoning are both expected and feared. It is local communities’ responses to suspected cases of poisoning in the region which form the basis of the present enquiry.

This paper draws on evidence from ethnographic fieldwork at sites from three sites located either side of the South Sudan/Uganda border (see Figure 1). Despite geographical distance

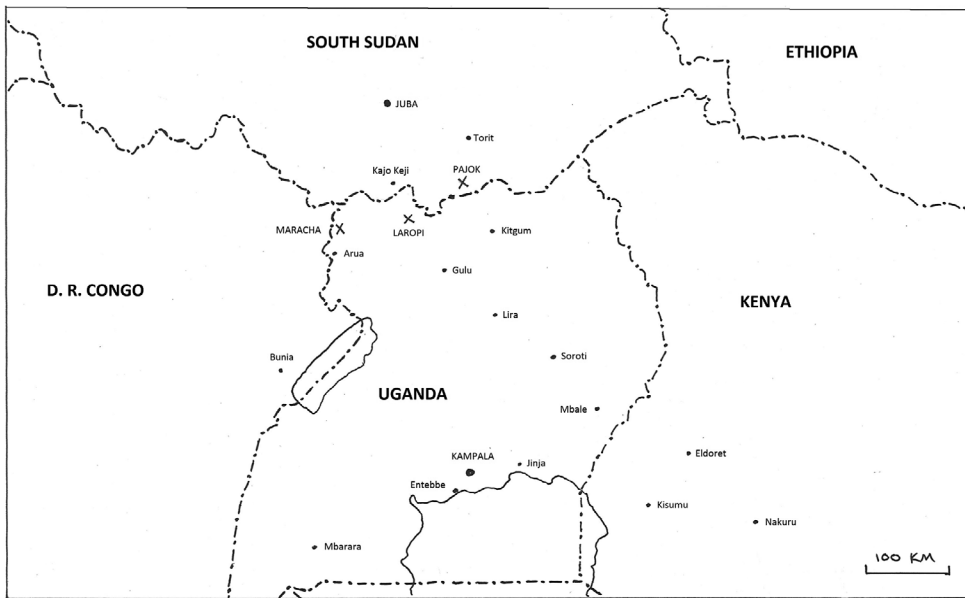


Figure 1. Map of research sites across Uganda/South Sudan Borderlands. Source: Ryan Joseph O'Byrne.

and different histories, the authors encountered similar processes for dealing with poisoning, and suspected poisoners at the community level. Although anthropologists working in the same or nearby locations during British colonial occupation documented the violence, or memory of violence, of the punishments or expulsions of those suspected of poisoning, present mechanisms to deal with the issue seem somewhat different. Across our field sites, poisoning remains prevalent today. Whenever sudden deaths occur, a diagnosis of poisoning is one of the possibilities discussed by close relatives. If poisoning is confirmed as the cause of death, those responsible must be held to account. Yet, in select cases, both the overt violence previously documented and the oracles formerly used to discern the identity of culprits have disappeared,² instead replaced by systems of collective voting. Although these responses – which generally involve secret ballot procedures – can be interpreted as progressive, democratic or developmental,³ they may equally be transformations within indigenous dispute resolution and arbitration methods, and therefore part of the cultural milieu existing prior to any development initiatives.

In South Sudan, O'Byrne was based in the Eastern Equatorial town of Pajok for a 16-month period during 2013–2014 (see Figure 2). Pajok is a relatively isolated rural community of predominantly slash and burn agriculturalists, comprised of mainly Acholi groups. In late 2014, O'Byrne observed one incident of community voting relating to a fear of poisoners and heard about a second that had taken place two years earlier (in 2012). In Uganda, evidence is drawn from Maracha and Moyo Districts of West Nile (see Figure 2). In a particular sub-county in Maracha, Storer encountered the resolution of a year-long poisoning dispute during the early months of fieldwork in 2016. The meeting occurred in a rural parish, which coalesced around a small trading centre, frequented by traders from Congo and surrounding Ugandan towns. It was in this trading centre that deaths had occurred. The area is almost exclusively inhabited by Lugbara communities, and a collective voting process had been

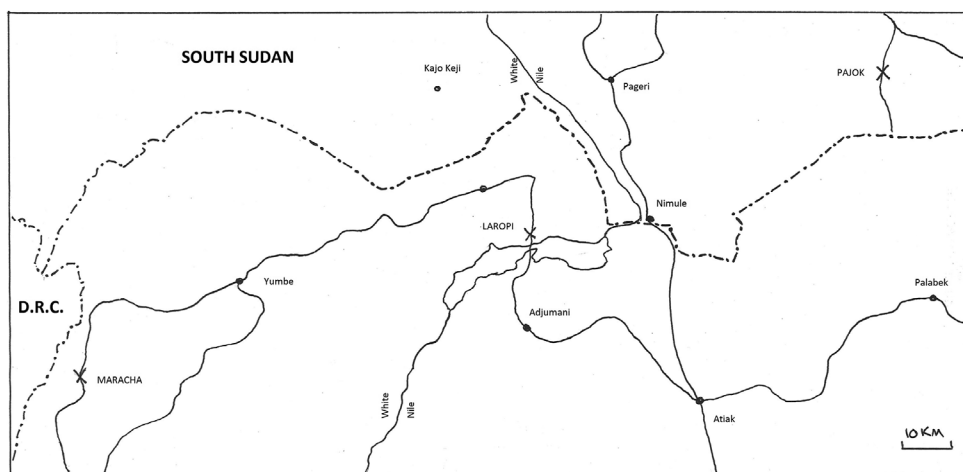


Figure 2. Map of research sites in Uganda. Source: Ryan Joseph O'Byrne.

previously used to deal with a spate of armed robberies in the early 2000s, believed to be perpetrated by newly settled outsiders to the area. In Moyo, Reid was based in Laropi, a small town on the East Bank of the River Nile almost entirely populated by Madi groups. At the time of her initial field work in 2008, a growing number of villages in Moyo and Adjumani districts were employing what were described locally as 'elections' to identify and expel those suspected of poisoning and witchcraft. Many of those who participated in these elections identified them as being a 'progressive' alternative to the violent approaches used to remove suspected poisoners in the past.⁴

Each of the sites is populated by one fairly homogenous 'ethnic' group: Acholi, Lugbara and Madi, respectively. The consensus is that though these identities existed in a more fluid form prior to colonial rule, boundaries between distinct ethnic groups were codified during the early years of British colonial occupation, according to the tribes in which administrators expected African groups to be organised. Speaking of Madi identity in particular, Allen notes that whilst to an extent imported, colonial tribal classifications were to some extent based on pre-existing notions of collective identity:

[T]he present currency of tribal identities would be something truly extraordinary if they were merely the product of an ethnic grid introduced in colonial days. Tribes were not simply invented by British officials, but were formed out of what was available.⁵

It is certainly true that the linguistic and other similarities, for example, between the Lugbara and Madi troubled colonial officials trying to divide them. These similarities are still acknowledged today, and many talk of a 'Lugbara-Madi' identity. Similar connections also exist between Madi and Acholi, with what became the Acholi ethnic identity being largely created by incorporation of Luo-speaking elites into Madi and other groups prior to colonial rule.⁶ Nonetheless, even if local identifications already seemed to be tending towards some generalised ethnic coherencies, ultimately it was ongoing colonial intervention based upon colonial-ascribed labels that often ignored local continuities that finally concretised local groups into their present forms.

Whilst colonial administrators, missionaries and anthropologists working prior to independence tended to present 'ethnic' groups as homogenous, we emphasise the shared

attributes of many peoples across the Uganda/ South Sudan border. Contemporary ethnic divisions are a relatively recent imposition in the histories of the groups concerned, and consequently there are continuities in the cultural heritage and world views of the three populations that form the basis of this enquiry. Given this, it is not surprising that certain aspects of the cultural repertoire have endured over time: knowledge of poisoning presents itself as one nefarious aspect of this inheritance.

Contextualising the borderlands

Historically, the borderlands of today's South Sudan and Uganda have all been affected by successive waves of domination and exploitation beginning with intense slave raiding prior to the early colonial period. The sites involved also shifted between successive colonial rulers, including the Belgian Congo, the Sudanese Anglo-Egyptian Condominium and the British Ugandan Protectorate. Different rulers subjected the region to different regimes of violence, discipline and separation. Since the late nineteenth century, the borders have been the site of persistent conflict, illegal trade and forced migration.⁷ The residual effects continued after independence, with sites remaining marginal to state-building projects. These processes of course varied spatially. Pajok, perhaps, was and remains much more marginal and outside processes of colonial and neo-colonial extraction than Maracha and Laropi.

In the postcolonial era, both Ugandan sites suffered violent reprisals in 1979 at the hands of the Ugandan army following the ousting of the dictator Idi Amin, who hailed from the area, and with whom, as West Nilers, they were equated. The majority of the population subsequently fled to Congo or Sudan until at least the mid-1980s. The experiences of communities as refugees varied greatly, with the treatment of Madi refugees from Laropi seeming to be have been significantly worse than that of their Lugbara neighbours.⁸ Despite these differences, however, in both cases there were few international agencies and limited state services to aid with resettlement on return. In Pajok, the community has experienced widespread displacement resulting from both the First and the Second Sudanese Wars (1955–1972 and 1983–2005, respectively), with most of those displaced finding temporary refuge among Acholi populations in northern Uganda. Displacement during the Second Sudanese War was near-total after the Ugandan Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) began using the region as a training base from 1991, with the area effectively remaining depopulated until the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005, after which return began. In short, whilst the temporality and scale differ, all sites have recently been subject to conflicts causing massive cross-border displacement. This displacement has brought communities into contact with those in distant places.

A continuous developmental presence has been represented by the Christian missions which entered the region from the early twentieth century. The Catholic Comboni mission was particularly influential, with missionaries bringing development in the form of education and basic medical intervention in addition to offering spiritual counsel. The Protestant, African Inland Mission was also prominent, particularly in West Nile and across equatorial South Sudan. These early missions were remarkably successful at establishing a Christian majority in the region with up to 90% of the Acholi population becoming Catholic or Anglican by 1939. Although the exact activities of missionaries of course differed, most local ontologies have gradually incorporated Christian moral ideals. Interventions have strengthened local ideas about decency, respect and good conduct reproducing the moral and socio-political

status quo advocated for by elders. Porter terms the overall end goal of this status quo as 'social harmony', a situation which can premise unity and togetherness of the community above certain individual grievances, and which can be considered as illiberal and oppressive to some persons.⁹

Missionaries vehemently disavowed 'traditional' practices such as ancestor veneration and shrine consultation as pagan and satanic. The success of this varied, some ancestor veneration continues in Pajok, at least. Christian approaches towards 'witchcraft' have been less clear-cut than attempted eradication of 'traditional' religion. On occasion, the legitimacy of early Christianity was premised on an ability to afford believers with spiritual protection. The same seems true of the more recent Evangelical and Pentecostal churches which have appeared in the region, and whose services regularly feature exorcisms and various visible manifestations of 'enchanted Christianity'.¹⁰ In many cases, trying to address cases of witchcraft seems to fuel local fears by confirming the existence of witches and the demonic. This is clearly demonstrated in Behrend's work on the Catholic Church in Torro from the 1970s to the present, where, amidst local fears of cannibals, 'by trying to manage, explain, and put a stop to the situation of internal terror, they [the church] ended up ... [re]producing the crisis'.¹¹ The impact of Christian mission and organisations is important since they represent the main development presence in the region. Nonetheless, it is equally important to note that neither the ubiquity of church membership in the region, nor the widespread disavowal of customary religion necessarily has a corresponding impact upon local worldviews. Many Christians not only continue to engage in their 'traditional' belief systems and rituals but, likewise, just as many continue to believe in and conduct their daily lives in response to the very real threat of poisoning, sorcery and witchcraft.

Although the presence of international development agencies is limited across all field sites, each has been affected by wider state-building projects as well as incorporation into global projects of capitalist accumulation and other elements of processes usually termed 'modernity'. The sites on the Ugandan side of the border have been subject to a much more intensive, decentralised state-building project than South Sudanese regions. In terms of 'development', there have been virtually no sustained activities of infrastructure or institution building in Pajok, and those in process were disrupted by the outbreak of war in December 2013. In West Nile, the activities of development actors are not unfamiliar to Ugandans, although their presence is often fleeting and their activities found wanting.

Conflict was part of a more recent, and ongoing history in Pajok, but in all cases, the authors found populations were actively engaged in activities to ascertain everyday security and restore community, rather than endlessly reflecting on the upheavals of the past. This research is grounded within these local epistemologies and lived experiences. In the field sites, poisoning is a concerning part of everyday life: attacks take place in the spaces of social, communal and commercial life, and feature regularly in everyday discourse. Although poisoning may seem perplexing, exotic or extreme to outsiders, it is a very real everyday possibility and occurrence for those inhabiting communities across the South Sudan/Uganda borderlands.

Poisoning in the past

The study of 'sorcery' is a major theme in the anthropological canon, although writers in different periods have taken different intellectual slants towards the phenomenon. Writing

on the Azande of today's Western Equatoria, Evans-Pritchard made an early and influential distinction between witchcraft, as an embodied inherited trait, and sorcery, as the use of material substances:

A witch performs no rite, utters no spell, and possesses no medicines. An act of witchcraft is a psychic act. They [Azande] believe also that sorcerers may do them ill, by performing magic rites with bad medicines. Azande distinguish clearly between witches and sorcerers.¹²

From what we know through Evans-Pritchard's colonial era accounts of the Azande context, whilst witchcraft was seemingly an everyday phenomenon and witches were often dealt with publicly and after confession reaccepted into communities, sorcerers were reviled, 'inverted' beings. They were often outsiders who had come to localities without any kinship connections, often seeking labour. Sorcery was considered a heinous crime, a deeply anti-social force violating all bonds of kinship and relationality. Consequently, it was unable to be tolerated. For example, just as Evans-Pritchard found among the Zande,¹³ Lugbara elders could determine the witch sending the evil sentiments through oracular consultation and respond accordingly through ritual sacrifice. Attending to victims of sorcery, however, was more difficult and, being outside the jurisdiction of oracles or elders – and thus culturally appropriate means of ritual redress – Lugbara sorcerers would often be violently removed if identified.¹⁴ Furthermore, Leonardi has demonstrated that poison accusations – and, indeed, even specific attacks – were common across the wider region, often drawing local colonial governments into poison trials which 'transgresse[d] the boundary between occult practice and "real" criminality'.¹⁵

Crucially, the effects were also different: witchcraft could cause someone to fall sick or run mad, but they rarely died. Middleton argued that practising witchcraft was often a normal, expected response that elderly men used to compete for power and authority within the homestead.¹⁶ On the other hand, sorcery as recounted by anthropologists in the mid-twentieth century was a deeply malevolent force, difficult to control and almost always causing sudden death. As such, sorcerers were often removed from communities through violent killings or expulsions.

Following Evans-Pritchard's work, anthropologists during the colonial era set about applying this distinction to magical practices across the region.¹⁷ Of course, Evans-Pritchard made this distinction to a specifically Azande context, and it is unclear how much subsequent analyses elsewhere reflect local ontologies rather than anthropologists' preferences.¹⁸ This distinction may prove a useful heuristic, but local ontologies of the region evade neat typologies. For instance, working among the Lugbara in the mid-1970s, Barnes Dean concluded that the category of poison had greatly expanded to include spiritual afflictions more related to 'witchcraft' and that there was no longer such a clear separation between inherited, magical traits and the use of acquired, material substances.¹⁹

Following independence and during upheaval, poisoning has also been documented among the Madi in refugee camps in South Sudan in Harrell-Bond's *Imposing Aid*,²⁰ and extensively after return in Uganda by Tim Allen.²¹ In the latter case, Madi informants in Laropi relayed multiple killings of female poisoners to Allen, who argued that this violence was indicative of social trauma following years of upheaval, as well as the vigour with which returnees were attempting to re-assert moral limits. Allen asserts that the severity of these punishments relates to the fact that these poisoning attacks highlighted to communities that appropriate moral conduct could not be assured, even within the home or the family.

Thus, at various junctures in their documented history, groups across the border have attributed sudden deaths to the causations that makes sense through their lived experiences. An accusation of poisoning nearly always follows cases of death, especially the sudden death of young or healthy individuals, and where multiple deaths have occurred, communities in a state of panic search for urgent solutions in an attempt to resolve the issue and save lives.

Importantly, local understandings and articulations of poisoning accusations are not simply a form of social diagnosis but, significantly, always anchored within the empirical realities of sudden, unexpected, widespread or otherwise worrisome local deaths. If such deaths are considered to result from poisoning, responsibility is generally allocated close by: almost by logical necessity, the suspected poisoner is considered to be living in close proximity to their targets within the community – after all, how else could they have harmed their victims, as O’Byrne was often asked – and the proximity of this danger is much more important on an emic level than the specific physical or metaphysical mechanics of how poisoning might be done or whether it might be more magical than material. Although the latter distinction seems somewhat of an intellectual preoccupation of earlier anthropological analyses, such dissimilarities seem to matter little to communities actually involved in poisoning disputes. What is clear is that wherever deaths from poisoning are happening, *poisoners must be identified and removed from the community*. This was as true during colonial rule as it is today.

Poisoners in the present

Working after these legacies of upheaval, the authors all noted that beliefs in poisoning were widespread in their research locations. One of the primary means of poisoning at all sites is through food or drink, but this method retains a metaphysical or magical quality. Other metaphysical modes exist, informants told the authors that poisoners could simply lay their hands on food in order to contaminate it, place ensorcelled material within a compound to injure people or lay poison across a path the victim is known to frequent.²² Poisoning always depends upon intent: for example although two people might eat from the same plate, only the intended victim is affected. One significant change is that the variety of substances used by poisoners has now increased. Whilst in the 1950s poison was usually extracted from the venom of a snake, a variety of industrial chemicals including fertiliser and hair dye are now thought to be used, including hair dye and insecticides.

Symptoms of poisoning across the region include a swollen stomach, fever, aching of the feet, legs or lower limbs, extremely painful headaches, incontinence or diarrhoea, seemingly random bouts of nausea and, most disturbingly, sudden and perhaps unexplainable deaths. Although there is also a recognition in some instances that these symptoms could also be the result of malaria or similarly common diseases, in all sites there was a definite sense that a hybrid understanding of medicine can exist, with a biomedical understanding often sitting easily alongside more spiritual or magical explanations.²³ Thus, whether considered as individual experience or wider communal pattern, such symptoms and events continue to invite persons and communities to ponder about the everyday realities of poisoning activities.

It is important to contextualise poisoning in a region where spiritual worlds and magical threats are numerous, manifest themselves differently for the victims involved and hence require different action of the part of public authorities. Many people within these same communities also experience spirit possession, unwanted visits from evil spirits or attacks

of witchcraft. Those who believed themselves to be attacked by evil spirits, for example, generally sought the counsel and healing of the powerful leaders in various churches. Whilst dimensions of spiritual insecurity share certain similarities, in each case the authors all encountered novel mechanisms designed to deal specifically with poisoners. These are described chronologically in terms of when events occurred.

Laropi

In villages around the trading centre of Laropi, preparation for elections to root out suspected poisoners was relatively well planned and said to be a reaction to a rise in unexplainable deaths. Community members across the area expressed suspicion of certain villages with increased incidence of poisoning, as well as concern about the insufficient legal pathways available to deal with the accused. In some instances, the police were seen to be 'on the side' of the poisoners, or the burden of evidence required in court to prove guilt was too high. As one male resident explained to Reid:

The election process started with meetings to find out main social problems, the masses said the major social problem is wizardry. Members of the village said if they are to go and know people who are behind the tragedies are wizards, they knew they would be defeated in court because of a lack of evidence- then they would have self- administered elections.

In Laropi, Reid discerned that poisoners were often referred to as witches or wizards, but their activities were understood to be motivated by jealousy or malice, and would involve alleged harming their victims using acquired poisons.

Local council members and other concerned community members gathered to pass by-laws in an effort to legitimise actions against those accused of poisoning, announcing these on the Trans-Nile Radio, a popular radio station in the community. Reid was told that the elections around Laropi were inspired by similar events in neighbouring villages in Adjumani District. Secret ballot voting, recorded testimony from the accused and accusers and in some cases, over-sight from an independent 'chief electoral commissioner' from a neighbouring village were extolled as progressive, transparent, democratic and effective means of expelling those voted out.²⁴ In one instance, a camera was hired to photograph the accused and document the proceedings. Registers of attendance were kept on file.

The accused were evicted from the villages and in some cases subjected to violence. There were also reports that an inability to resettle elsewhere had led to instances of suicide. In some cases, the results of these elections were broadcast on the Trans-Nile Radio, alerting other communities to the outcomes of the proceedings and the identity of those accused or found guilty. Nonetheless, the new electoral process was considered successful at exposing existing poisoners and deterring others from such work without violence or culpability for the accuser. The inclusivity of proceedings was also identified as a legitimising factor and all residents including those suspected and eventually expelled were eligible to participate. Reid was told by another male resident:

Every village member came and was told to attend the meeting, even those who were evicted participated in evicting others.

In this case, even those who were accused attended:

The wizards were also voting, even those accused participated and were surprised to learn (that they were voted against). (Male Resident)

Pajok

In Pajok, the discovery of a large, butchered snake in October 2014 prompted fears of poisoners in the community: poison obtained from snakes is a source of great fear and possessing snake parts demonstrates intention to use poison. The significance of this snake was explained to O'Byrne by a community leader during the observed voting event:

Another snake was found, dead, just like this one, with the poison missing. At that time (early 2012) there were many people dying in the community ... and people were very angry. There was much fighting, people hurt, huts destroyed. It was very bad ... But this time, it is not so bad. No one is dying. I think maybe the Chief will be able to keep them calm. They are wanting to start beating people, maybe even to killing. But the Chief is saying they will all write down the names of the people they think are responsible and then they will have the election and when the votes are counted they will know what the community thinks. Then, if anything happens, the community will know it is one of those people so they will know who will be the ones responsible. So, they are doing it like that to stop the fighting. To help with the security. That way maybe there will be no violence.

This meeting, which took place several days after the snake's body was found, was held in the school compound attached to the local branch of the African Inland Church, apparently due to the fact that this compound provided the only open space in the Boma which was both centrally located and large enough to hold the expected number of attendees. There were over 250 people present, mostly young men, sitting under the shade of the various compound trees. The meeting was 'chaired' by the Boma Chief and his two 'advisors', who sat behind a small table in a clearing in front of the gathering. This clearing was the focal point for the meeting, where much of the speaking took place. After the chief introduced the meeting, people from among the crowd took turns to speak about the issue for the next few hours. Finally, some resolution was reached, and a tense silence descended while the Boma Chief and his staff prepared to take a communal vote. An attendee explained:

They will have some men move around with paper and the people will write the name on it and put it in that box. Then, when everyone has written the name, the Chief and his council will take them away and count them and the top names will be read out at another meeting. These are the suspects. Then, everyone will be watching those people closely. That will help with the security.

When all the votes had been cast and the box was taken back to the officials behind the table, the Boma Chief made a short announcement. 'He is closing the meeting', the same attendee says, 'the elders will announce when the next meeting will be. Maybe next weekend. And that is the meeting where they will inform the community of the results [of the election]'.

The next meeting never took place, however, and to the best of O'Byrne's knowledge, the community was never informed about the results of the election which had taken place. Certainly, no community action was taken and, unlike the events following the previous snake-related incident in 2012, no one had their property seized or their homes and crops destroyed. About a month later, interested in the results of this event, O'Byrne met the Boma Chief, who noted

The community do not know who is doing it. But for now, no one is dying. Everyone safe. So just to keep watching, following the investigations. Not to do anything until there is the evidence. Because the government is very strong in needing to have the evidence before doing anything.

Not long afterwards, war came to Pajok, and, given the context of what actual interpersonal violence meant for the community, it seems the events narrated above lost their original importance.

Maracha

In one sub-county in Maracha, voting mechanisms were mobilised in response to a spate of the sudden and unexplainable deaths of five young men in 2015 and 2016, all working near or connected to the local trading centre. Others victims were targeted, but survived after seeking the costly assistance of a renowned local herbalist, who had trained in Congo. The quick succession of sudden deaths in the area was interpreted as being caused by the evil activities of a certain resident who had acquired poison. Although some of the deaths had been biomedically diagnosed, there was widespread understanding among the community that poisoning was 'rampant'. Such fears were compounded when suspects presented supposed poisons during church services: although attempting to demonstrate reform, these displays were read as deceitful by influential members of the community.

Consequently, local residents put pressure on the authority figures who resided locally to end the poisoning attacks and remove the suspects. Pressure particularly came from younger men, whose peers had been victim to the attacks. In response, local councillors and the trading centre committee announced a meeting during a busy market time the week before it was due to take place. Informants estimated that 200–400 people attended the meeting, with some people travelling from Arua town and surrounding districts. Among them, local counsellors, herbalists, survivors and suspects were all reportedly present. Some police were dispatched to attend, in case the proceedings became violent.

The proceedings began with the testimonies of survivors whose experiences were thought to make them well placed to identify poisoners. Following these testimonies, there was consultation with the public about how to deal with the problem. Initially, it was suggested that a voting system could be devised for the survivors. However, after someone raised the issue of who would speak for the dead victims, it was decided everyone present would vote. A local businessman bought notebooks which were ripped up to produce ballot papers and a box produced by a local official was used to collect votes. Before voting, people were instructed they could secretly write the name of poisoners, but also the names of 'witches, wizards and other bad people' in the community. The election process seemed to provide an opportunity for local authorities to deal with other grievances which were occurring alongside poisoning attacks.

Some relayed that they abstained from voting because they did not know the identity of the poisoner. Nonetheless, around 70–100 attendees did vote on the identity of the suspects. It is important that whilst residents agreed voting was a novel way of dealing with the problem, there was also a degree of scepticism that people would vote for personal enemies.

After voting, the ballot box was removed by the police, who informed attendees they would write letters to those accused. Authorities and residents maintained that the names should be announced publicly, though to Storer's knowledge this never happened. In the immediate aftermath, people began to meet separately to discern the poisoners' identities. Some days after the election, a man who had a previous association with poisoning fled the area. This seemed to assuage communities' sense of danger, in lieu of an official announcement of the suspects' names.

Discussion

The dynamics of poisoning in each location had local specificities. In Pajok and Laropi, for instance, those accused were woman who had come from outside, as expected according to historic patterns of accusation. Yet, in Maracha, the suspects were male. It is not the subject of the present inquiry to discuss differences in specific accusations. What is important is that in all cases there was a ubiquitous fear of poisoners and a belief that perpetrators motivated by envy and evil intent resided within the community and intended to harm others. In each site, poisoning is a crime necessitating forms of action.

The authorities involved in organising meetings were not limited to those considered 'traditionally' or 'culturally' legitimate. In Laropi and surrounding villages following the election, Reid observed that new governance mechanisms emerged which provided new avenues of organising communities and adjudicating accountability. New opportunities to consolidate power were also created, for example the post of 'chief-electoral commissioner', or reinforced in the additional responsibility taken on by some local officials in managing the elections. Dealing with spiritual insecurities created a fluid terrain allowing different elites to compete to provide communities with protection, proving their worth to local constituencies through symbolic strategies that Allen has termed 'moral populism'.²⁵ Similar processes have also been observed among Acholi communities, both by O'Byrne in Pajok in 2014 as well as by Allen in Gulu in 2013. In terms of the case of the infamous 'Mr Red' described by Allen, 'an election had been organised to confirm responsibility for the killings, and Christian activists, local councillors, Members of Parliament (MPs), other government officials and even the police were involved in supporting popular justice responses' against the man ultimately deemed to be responsible for the local witchcraft-related deaths, as well as the popular justice which was later meted out upon him and his property.²⁶ When questioned about not only their support but their actual involvement in vigilante forms of justice, local officials were 'disarmingly straightforward' about the fact that their involvement in such measures allowed them local legitimacy at the same time that confiscating suspects' finances funded their political campaigns.²⁷

Just as in Gulu, in each of the cases discussed in this article, the response was likewise institutionalised, although each in varying ways and to different extents. In Moyo district, there were by-laws against poisoning, yet in Maracha the meeting itself seemed to have a more ad hoc nature and the response was developed in a back and forth exchange between local authorities, survivors of poisoning and the community. Yet, in all cases the involvement of local authority figures was important, sometimes only serving to fuel the fire of accusation, mistrust and fear, leading to further moral panic surrounding invisible poisoning attacks. For example, in Moyo District, when questioned about the basis of accusations of poisoning, a Catholic priest ambiguously relayed to Reid, 'where there is smoke there is fire'. The time of response is also important: in Pajok, the mere discovery of a disemboweled snake triggered the election process, but in both West Nile instances, the response was much slower and only after successive sudden deaths were meetings held. The influence of state-building projects and development actors in this area is undeniably stronger in West Nile, so does this mean that this influence of national law prevents communities from responding to protect themselves?

Historically, poisoners discovered in any of these communities were killed or exiled. In Pajok, O'Byrne was told that it used to be common to stone to death or at least beat and

exile poisoners. However, laws have restricted such violence since the colonial period. National law now means killing a suspected poisoner amounts to a charge of murder. For example, as noted earlier, a similar election procedure had been initiated when the previous snake had been found in Pajok in 2012, and the three women the community deemed responsible for the incident had their houses and gardens burnt down and their belongings, animals and food taken. Following this community action, however, the South Sudanese state intervened to imprison and fine people, including the Boma Chief.

The secret voting mechanisms that emerged protected single accusers. In the case of Maracha, since deaths occurred in a trading centre with many outsiders coming to business, the prior history of some residents was not known. This means there was uncertainty about the identity, and number of suspects. But even when the identity of the suspect is known, naming a poisoner directly can be difficult for survivors, or family members of deceased. This fear of speaking openly about a poisoner's identity is heightened since there is no guarantee that the individual named will leave the area after being exposed, and could act again. Furthermore, there are deep and sometimes fatal repercussions for making a false accusation of poisoning. For Lugbara communities, falsely accusing a fellow clan or community member of poisoning would spoil the accused's reputation and the accuser would be obliged to pay expensive reparations. Formerly if an accusation was doubted, the accuser could also be subject to a curse from elders, which could result in death if their claims were false. The election process provided safety to identify poisoners, and preserved the anonymity of accusers from such reparations. But the voting process also provided a degree of immunity for the authorities. Embedded in the community, many local councillors were in a difficult position: they themselves feared the presence of poisoners, and also the repercussions of being directly associated with evicting an individual from an area, which would violate national law. At all locations, the election process was perceived to offer immunity to individuals and a shared mechanism of allocating responsibility beyond particular individuals.

In these situations where communities fear poisoners, rightly so – as poisoning generally causes sudden death and the only solution is to expel them – there is widespread perception that the state cannot protect them from this threat. Speaking of this and other incidents in Maracha, a member of the police relayed:

We tell them the law does not work like that, we are all citizens of Uganda, what about human rights?

Lack of protection from the state is not just due to its absence or arbitrary nature at the periphery,²⁸ but also the difficulty of providing the evidence required for legal poisoning accusations.²⁹ Whilst successive deaths accompanied by specific illnesses provide conclusive evidence that poisoners are at work in local ontologies, this is incompatible with the forms of evidence required by conventional courts. These state-like processes protect those speaking out about poisoning activities, whilst also protecting communities from the threat of poisoning. In colonial times, a variety of oracles were used to identify wrong-doers, including poisoners. Now, however, Christian teachings mean such oracles have been disavowed. Thus, where customary means to determine responsibility are no longer available, consensus may be the only option to determine a culprit's identity.

In each field site, there were strong calls for violent punishment of poisoners. Those that remembered such methods being used historically directly, or who had been told about them by their predecessors, remarked that they served as a strong deterrent and prevented

people from doing 'evil work'. Such deterrents can no longer be enacted, as killing or violently evicting poisoners is a crime under national law. Local authorities are thus in a difficult position: there is upwards pressure from the communities to permit violence or removal, but formal law prohibits it. As such, these electoral mechanisms might provide a best-fit solution to deal with a difficult problem, restoring security to the community through removing poisoners whilst protecting those who name the suspects from arrest.

These difficulties are encapsulated in the lamentations of one Maracha resident:

Mob justice by the community is wrong, people are ignorant and violence is bad. But it is to protect the community. The government is also ignorant with some of its actions. When somebody is identified as a poisoner, the government will come, but the police easily forget about what has happened, and there is no follow up. In this case the police do not investigate who is doing these evil things, so they protect the people doing the evil things, above the community.

Caught between local understandings of crime and the legal definitions of criminality and evidence in the constitution creates difficulties for authorities in all of the cases described. The high authorities were blamed for preventing communities from solving their own problems. As such, the legitimacy of the State is affected by the inability of its representatives to deal with the problem of poisoning: it is seen as not being able to protect people from what they fear most. But worse than this, the state is seen to side with the poisoners, rather than community members whose lives are under threat. Similar to what Geschiere found in Cameroon,³⁰ in Pajok O'Byrne was repeatedly told that state responses which protect poisoners and witches are explicit demonstrations of the nefarious truths behind state power and powerholders: that not only do high-level politicians use sorcerous means to acquire their power, but many are even poisoners or witches themselves.

To account for similar processes occurring in distant spaces, it seems logical that common factors would be driving these elections. These elections could be equated with a bottom-up adoption of the modern and judicial accountability mechanisms that are normally provided by the state. However, it would seem that the elections are happening in spite of, not because of wider rule of law developments. Owing to growing awareness and application of human rights and policing in all locations, these elections represent more of an evolution of previous approaches to assigning accountability than a revolutionary change. Elections still culminated in the eviction or escape of the suspects, the outcome of removal – which has been relatively constant through recent history – remains. And better still, processes avoid the 'long hands of the government',³¹ through linking the identification of suspects; no one community member or local authority figure can be blamed.

The management of occult disputes show us that developmental preoccupations of those on the ground at the margins encompass difficult challenges to life and livelihoods, consistently overlooked by development experts. At the very least, this must encourage a re-evaluation of our own notions of evidence, accountability, responsibility and democracy. Within the intersection of the spiritual and the material, the contested nature of these terms is possibly most evident.

The hybrid nature of authority at the periphery has been noted. The World Bank in a recent World Development Report encouraged the use of hybrid governance arrangement as a 'local best-fit solution'.³² Nevertheless, the hybrid constellations of authority in these African borderlands operate along very different logics than those perhaps imagined, or idealised, by distanced development experts. There has been a tendency to be over-enthusiastic about bottom-up mechanisms of collective decision-making. However, as we have shown, there

may be more to these poisoning 'elections' than at first meets the eye. At the same time, these elections may be lauded by their makers as bottom-up energies for development and democracy in places distant from the central state. However, it is more likely that emergent mechanisms might also be a form of 'best-fit' solution offering protection from malevolent spiritual insecurities in contexts where prior coping strategies have been eroded or prohibited by successive waves of displacement, ontological interference and 'modernity'. Equally, they may be a combination of all these factors and more.

Concluding remarks

These recent elections may represent modifications of so-called 'traditional' strategies to deal with those who commit perhaps the worst violations of moral codes, or, alternatively, as processes of self-modernisation which express a moral claim about the sharing of modernity and against the continuing marginalisation of the peoples of these areas. Yet, the similarities between these strategies are striking, despite divergent legacies of colonialism and violence and differential exposure to imposed Western law, aid or development. In the borderlands that form the subject of the present enquiry, the paucity of scholarship that exists is often imbued with what normative connotations of what law should look like and how culture, development and modernity should be experienced: African societies at the periphery continue to be classified according to what they are not.³³

Development experts have tended to approach programming and policy at the periphery of the state by presuming law does not exist, or have fetishised transitional justice interventions based on 'traditional' legal systems and cultural reconciliation. Both approaches risk ignoring what matters locally. There has been a tendency to label collective decision-making processes with Western vocabularies, which provide a ready yet too easy lens for us to subject groups to analysis and recommendations. Yet, this lens may be too simple or too foreign, and gloss-over, or even simply be unable to encapsulate local life worlds and present realities. Already existing moral codes and social norms, as well as the associated sanctions involved, may have a far more important role in regulating the everyday social and moral orders and those deviating from them than Western ideals of democracy, participation or fairness that often remain illusory for many in any developmental context, anywhere.

The enquiry presented here may have raised more questions than it has provided answers. The researchers were, after all, drawn to these places in part because they are chronically ignored both nationally and internationally, by academia as well as development. In some cases, the basis for all that is known about these areas was written over half a century ago. Therefore, the authors strongly suggest that further research into similar and linked processes is undertaken throughout Africa, and beyond. Important questions remain as to how strategies to deal with magical threats are institutionalised elsewhere. For example, how specific are these processes and dynamics to Eastern/Central Africa, post-conflict or marginally developed situations, or indeed the borderland context itself? What is it about the sociocultural milieu of these places and peoples that makes these new anti-poison processes a now legitimate response?

Certainly, these questions can only be answered if researchers cease hiding in the safety of normative ideas about what constitutes justice (or even reality). Equally, we must learn to appreciate the legacy and role of different frameworks, norms and laws in governing everyday life at the periphery, as well as development and even global processes writ large.

It is essential to consider all elements of local cultural systems in forming relevant development responses, as well as to take all local world views seriously. This is especially true of those which may play an important role in the local success or failure of development initiatives, not just those which fit development actors' a priori legal, political or ontological assumptions.

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Notes

1. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft among the Azande*, 1–3.
2. Allen, “Study of the Ugandan Madi”; and Middleton, *Lugbara Religion*.
3. Allen and Reid, “Justice at the Margins”.
4. Ibid.
5. Allen, “Study of the Ugandan Madi,” 52.
6. Allen, “Violence and Moral Knowledge”; Atkinson, “Ethnicity among the Acholi”; and Atkinson, *The Roots of Ethnicity*.
7. Leopold, “Crossing the Line”.
8. Allen, “A Flight from Refuge”.
9. Porter, “Justice and Rape on the Periphery”; and Porter, *After Rape*.
10. Gifford, *Christianity, Development and Modernity*.
11. Behrend, *Resurrecting Cannibals*, 12.
12. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft among the Azande*, 21.
13. Ibid.
14. Middleton, *Lugbara Religion*, 236.
15. Leonardi, “Poison in the Ink Bottle,” 34.
16. Ibid.
17. See, e.g. Middleton and Winter, *Witchcraft and Sorcery*.
18. See, e.g. critiques by Turner, “Witchcraft and Sorcery”.
19. Barnes Dean, “Lugbara Illness and Social Change,” 72.
20. Harrell-Bond, *Imposing Aid*.
21. Allen, “The Violence of Healing”.
22. Allen and Storm, “Quests for Therapy in Northern Uganda,” 32.
23. Allen and Storm, “Quests for Therapy in Northern Uganda”; and Allen and Reid, “Justice at the Margins”.
24. Allen and Reid, “Justice at the Margins”.
25. Allen, “Vigilantes, Witches and Vampires”.
26. Ibid., 361.
27. Ibid., 382–4.
28. Lund, “Twilight Institutions”.
29. See e.g. Leonardi, “Poison in the Ink Bottle”.
30. Geschiere, *The Modernity of Witchcraft*.
31. Tapscott, *The Government has Long Hands*, 13.
32. World Bank, *World Bank Development Report 2011: Conflict, Security and Development*, 42.
33. Macdonald and Allen, “Social Accountability,” 280.

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