Occult Economies, Demonic Gifts, and Ontological Alterity: An Evangelical Biography of Evil and Redemption in Rural South Sudan

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Abstract

This paper recounts the autobiography of an evangelical South Sudanese pastor who has been under water to the land of demons, telling of cosmic flows of persons, power, and wealth between times, places, and dimensions. Although it builds on stories circulating across Africa since colonial times and emphasises paradigms found throughout the occult economies literature, what is significant about this autobiography is that it relates the narrator's own experience. This is important because although these occult elements reference global processes, the narrative given is as much about the local as it is the global. Likewise, it as much spiritual as it is material or economic. My analysis thus goes beyond the occult economy or its material effects and instead demonstrates the ontological alterity and spiritual meaningfulness of such incursions and attempts to push the envelope of academic analyses and interpretations relating to the diverse complexity of religious experience, African or otherwise.

Keywords:

Acholi, Evangelical Christianity, gift exchange, occult economies, ontological alterity, South Sudan

Introduction

The end of the world is nigh—this is a fundamental truth among South Sudanese evangelical Christians. Under the water, there are demon cities. This is also taken to be common knowledge across much of sub-Saharan Africa (Allen 2015; De Boeck 2005; Meyer 1995; Pype 2017; Victor 2019), including in the Acholi-speaking area of South Sudan where I undertook PhD fieldwork during 2013 and 2014. Indeed, you only need attend to the wickedness of the world to see how these two everyday facts of evangelical life are intimately connected. In return for the souls of the innocent, satanic powers flow up from underwater cities in the demon world to those on earth who trade people for worldly success. In this way evil is repaid with status, power, and wealth.

This paper discusses such cosmic movements, of manifold and largely invisible flows of persons, power, and wealth between not only different times and places but also multiple dimensions. It is about the real and the unreal, the dead and the undead. In particular, I emphasise demonic, vampiric, or zombie-like paradigms that reflect local interpretations of global flows of power and evil that echo findings elsewhere in Africa (Apter 2012; Bonhomme 2012; Niehaus 2005; Stewart and Strathern 2004; White 2000), particularly within the occult economies literature (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999; Geschiere 1997; Moore and Sanders 2001).

I argue that although the incorporation of these elements reference and make sense of—as well as truth claims about—global networks of cosmologies, monies, morality, and

power, such narratives are as much about what is happening within local communities as they are the incorporation of those communities within the global system. After all, as Sahlins (1987) and others argue, all entanglements with global actors and processes take place within local worlds, under local conditions, and through local conceptualisations. Likewise, it is imperative to emphasise that the narratives referenced are as much about the spiritual or cosmological as the material or economic: in the minds and lives of my interlocutors, at least, it is precisely the religious dimensions of such experiences that are not only the most real but also the most important. The rest—the money, power, technologies, and so on—are the details that bring the religious to life.

Therefore this paper links Acholi demonic narratives to aspects of the occult economy, demonstrating that, at least partially, they are local manifestations of wider attempts to understand those mutually reinforcing processes known by such terms as colonialism, globalisation, or modernisation. However, as well as the usual economic analyses of African narratives about zombie workers and demon pacts, I highlight how local systems of meaning incorporate wider regional and global cosmological figures, practices, and understandings such as underwater demon worlds (Allen 2015; Apter 2012; Bonhomme 2012; De Boeck 2005; Eni 1987; Meyer 1995; Pype 2017; Victor 2019) or evangelical notions of spiritual warfare (Rio 2010; Robbins 2004). In this way, although I link local demonic narratives to global processes, my analysis goes beyond those studies that seem to begin and end with the occult economy or its material effects. Indeed, I suggest there is more to be understood about such narratives than the local production of meanings about globalisation. What is lost in such analyses is the importance of the very spiritual elements that make these supposedly economic phenomena stand out as interesting or unique in the first place. In fact, one could argue that the preponderance and limits of such interpretations

reflect a recurring flaw in Western academia: the marginalisation of the cosmological, religious, or spiritual to the privilege of the politico-economic.

In linking larger global processes to specific local occurrences, I demonstrate how global incursions become locally and, importantly, spiritually meaningful. This is done through the autobiographical account of one man—Saul,[1] a Christian pastor in the evangelical African Inland Church (AIC)—who has been underwater (*te pii*) to the land of demons (*lobo catani*). What is significant about this account is not the thematic content, which shares commonalities with similar narratives across Africa, but rather that it recounts the narrator's own experience.

As Finnström argues, 'people's stories, based on their journeys in life, [are] not necessarily linear or with any clear direction. Lives are often messed up; so are their chronicles' (2015, S228). The same can be said of Saul's autobiography, a story given to me as a complex temporal web I had to disentangle through my own cultural telos before I came anywhere near comprehending it. Indeed, of everything I encountered 'in the field', the content and narration of Saul's autobiography was the thing that challenged me most, fiercely demonstrating my epistemological and methodological limits. It took further, agonising self-reflection to come to terms with the fact that in 'comprehending' this account, I had actually done significant violence to Saul, his narrative, and his realities. It was not until I read Finnström's *War Stories and Troubled Peace* (2015) that the violent truths of my epistemic hegemony came flooding out from the black-and-white typeset pages. As Finnström notes therein, 'when the agency of the storyteller … is restricted to a dominant and linear discourse, alternative and more complex experiences and sociopolitical realities are obscured' (2015, S223).

In this way, then, this paper is an attempt to open up academic analysis and interpretation even further to the diverse complexity of religious experiences, European or

African, evangelical or otherwise. As such, and inspired by the project of Taussig (1993), it is an attempt to narrate local experiences that might be simultaneously interpreted as both yet neither mimesis nor alterity. However, as the act of narration 'is always steeped in relations of power … an anthropological ambition must be to find ways to account for the agency of the protagonist of the story or the storyteller herself' (Finnström 2015, S225). I have therefore endeavoured to reconstitute Saul's story in such a way as to make it as coherent as possible, while still doing justice to his experiences as well as his interpretative agency. Moreover, in a further reflexive attempt to reinscribe Saul's agency, as well as to engage in my own politics of storytelling (Jackson 2002), I refuse the academic tendency to negate ontological multiplicity and, as an ethical and political move as much as an epistemological or theoretical one, steadfastly encourage the reader to 'take things as they are' (Jackson 1996). I must note, however, that for the sake of narrative simplification and engagement I have taken license to structure Saul's biography along the lines of an extended vignette. Thus rendered, his story jumps between first-, second-, and third-person accounts, retaining much of its original fractured and atemporal character. Following Holbraad (2012), one might call this an attempt at 'ontography' as much as a form ethnography.

Finally, wary that my presentation of Saul's biography might be thought to exoticise or trivialise the world and worldview of an African man—and, by inference, Africans or Africa in general—I must note that it is not only African evangelicals but also foreign missionaries who spoke this way about demons. In fact, the inspiration to initiate this particular line of inquiry began through conversations with American missionaries who were visiting South Sudan, rather than local South Sudanese themselves. It is also important to note that in many of its specific dimensions *te pii* is as much an old cultural and symbolic terrain as it is a new cosmo-ontological construct: it is old in a broader regional comparative sense in which, across Africa, large bodies of water are connected to powerful spiritual forces

(Evans-Pritchard 1956; Kenny 1977; Lienhardt 1954; Seligman and Seligman 1932). On the other hand, the exact dimensions of this specific manifestation of *te pii* are relatively new within the Acholi South Sudanese world—likely only since the conjoint experience of exile and evangelical Christianity from the late 1980s—although it is now somewhat standard across the wider region, especially among evangelicals (Allen 2015; Apter 2012; Bonhomme 2012; De Boeck 2005; Meyer 1995; Pype 2017; Victor 2019).

A Meeting in Magwi

On the day in question, my neighbour John and I left early in the morning, riding John's dilapidated Chinese motorcycle the approximately 40 kilometres to Saul's home in Magwi. We arrived at his compound, a collection of mud huts rather ambiguously demarcated by the surrounding fruit trees, to find Saul waiting for us. Joining him were two paternal uncles, a scattering of children desperate to see the *munu* (white man), and old Reverend Yofes, an ancient-looking pastor in one of the local evangelical churches. After the obligatory greetings, small talk, and food, we settled down to the matter at hand.

'Brother John tells me you want to know about underwater, about demons?' Saul began in English. 'If this is true, I can tell you. I know these things, I have been there. Let us begin'.

While John did his best to help translate as Saul moved back and forth between Acholi, Arabic and English, the account that follows remains the most amazing biographical account I have ever heard.[2]

An Autobiography of Evil and Redemption

'During the last war' (the Second Sudanese War, 1983-2005), Saul began, 'I was a fish seller in Uganda. I had a friend and together we would catch fish to sell. My friend came to me one

day, and we began drinking very heavily. Then we fell asleep, outside, right where we had been sitting. During the night, I woke up and found my friend missing. He did not return until morning, saying we did not have enough money, that we needed more but he knew how to get it. But to get it we had to go on a boat. On that boat there were some eggs my friend said were for catching very big fish but they only worked in the middle of the river. We went out on the water but when we got to the middle, suddenly a very heavy wind started blowing'. 'When the wind came', Saul said, 'we found we were not in a boat but in a *matatu* [a minivan taxi].[3] The driver was just a like a normal person but with the head of a snake. The taxi was full of people but no one was talking, everyone was silent. And the water had come up over the taxi. We were not on top of the water but under it, and the taxi was driving through it like on a road. The reason there were the eggs was because it was not a real boat. It was a demon, a snake. When you enter, the taxi goes underwater. And the eggs are the head, the boat is the body'.

'Under the water', Saul related, 'there was a place like a bus park and the environment was just like above. There were buildings, plants, people. But it was silent. No meeting people, no greeting, just going into offices'.

Some demons who looked like people came to meet Saul and his friend and take them to the Demon King (*Rwot Jok Madit*).[4] Those demons spoke to Saul's friend, wanting to know why they came to that place. His friend said they needed money. The demons started asking them many questions: 'What is your plan? To be rich? What for? When do you want the money? What will you do with it?'
But when they went under the water Saul said, he was not planning anything, so he asked for the money to be given when he returned to South Sudan. Because of this, they told him to go to Mombasa, to get his power there. First, however, they needed 60 cattle.

At this point old pastor Yofes, who had been listening silently, entered the discussion: 'If you want money, you need to give a cow. But a cow is a human being! So they take your family so you can get rich or powerful. Especially if a hard worker! Because they take the life out of you but you are not dead, just your spirit taken. Like dead but being alive. They get dead people to work for them. Digging, planting, fishing'.

'Yes!' cried Saul. 'The community is fearful of them. They bring the sickness, death, unlawful behaviour. And the bodies under the water multiply. Today there is one, two. Then tomorrow ten! And the war now in Juba,[5] that is because politicians go to The King Underwater, because they want the money, the power.

'And underwater is like the surface, like going to an office in the city. There are demons directing you, showing you where to go, but no talking. Just showing. And it is very big: many buildings, many people. There are many women down there, beautiful women. And it is men in the offices, but the women are the messengers. When the men want something, a person, they get the women to bring. The men are the directors, the women are messengers. Like in an office. And the offices are like government offices, so they send you to one office, then another. If you need money, go to that office. If you need something else, go to another. The women take you. They say "get an application", so the women take you. Then another for the stamp'.

After this, Saul said, 'I left and went to Mombasa, but the journey was easy, like moving on air. To travel to Mombasa you go underwater on the dragon boat, not above ground. When you reach it, you do not go to the real city, only to the underwater Mombasa where the demons are. Not above. When I reached Mombasa I was given many powers: the power of free transport, to move without problem. Never again to pay. Another was the contacts on the phone so I could call the demons if I wanted something or needed someone to die'.

When Saul arrived in Mombasa they looked at him, gave him a permit, and sent him to India. 'They told me my money needed to come from India. And they sent me there because when they asked what I needed, I said riches, but not now, later. So the demons knew I would win many people for them. The ones given power in Mombasa want to be rich now, but not me. So I was sent to India because power in my future. And so they gave me the power of thunder and lightning to bring people to them. Because whenever people gather, they will die in large numbers when you burst it on them. And that is why they sent me to see the King of All the Demons in India'.

'The Demon King (*Rwot Jok Madit*) was there in India', Saul said, 'a very beautiful woman, an Indian woman. I was taken to meet her. And when I reached the Master King, money was given to me. The Master King asked me when I would start my plans. I said wait two years and then I would start. Then they demanded more cattle. But like Yofes told you, when they talk about cattle they mean people, human beings. And when I made the promise the Master King gave me a magic screen, just like a computer. You use it to see people. Anywhere, even America. So then if you want anything, you look into the screen and it will be sent to you. Automatic. And they gave me a hedgehog to stay with me and hold my power.

'The main city of demons is in India. The generals, the president, the businessmen, they all go there to get power.[6] You know, many things people sell are made in India. They all say "India" on them, and the people who sell them are powerful! They were sent to India also! The ones with the small shops, they have only been to Mombasa. But the big shops, the ones with all the things made in India and China, they are the ones who were sent to India. That is how you know.

'There is nothing stronger than the demons of India. They are the only ones with that screen, and so they are powerful. It gives whatever you want, kills whoever you want. Even people in America! And the hedgehog, that is a special weapon. You take that, you pull the

hair from it and throw it at people. On the screen is the picture of who you want to destroy. Then you take the hair of the hedgehog and throw it at the picture and they will die. And then the underwater agents will take them, to work. That is why they give people that power.

'And the demons there, they look just like Indians. The women all have long hair and wear clothes on their heads. The men are all very fat. The buildings are all very big and beautiful, shiny and metal and glass, just like in America. And there are many vehicles. What is here on earth is also under the sea'.

When the Sudanese war finished in 2005, Saul returned to South Sudan. He said: 'I had promised to start my work at that time, but now did not want to. So the people underwater, they started to really disturb me. Especially after 2009, when I got married, they really disturb me very bad. They came me with the snake and made me to eat it. Eating it is eating the flesh of people underwater. And I ate, but without knowing. And so they disturb me very bad.

'Another time, someone was lost in the bush. People wanted to look for her, but because I did not help they were going to fine me. When I refused to pay the money, they started beating me. So I drank some alcohol and was given the power by the demons to scatter them. Many came to fight me, but I picked it up a motorcycle and threw it at them and they ran away. That happened after I ate the flesh. That is the power [of that flesh]. That is why I fought those people'.

'Another time', Saul said, 'I broke the law of the demons so they planned to destroy my wife. But my wife was a Believer, a true Christian who went to church. I had never even been inside a church! But then the missionaries came and I asked the missionaries to pray for me and burn the demon things. So they came and started to pray. Immediately the demons came and possessed me and threw me down so I was crying and shaking. Then two women appeared and took me up in the air to the top of a mountain. They beat me and forced me to

eat dried flies. After this they said I had much work still to do for them, so they took me back to the bottom of the mountain. And when I returned home I found many people. But I did not talk to anyone, did not say anything. Just went to eat, alone, no sharing. But a pastor started praying and cursed the demon that possessed me. And they took all the things I had been given and burned them, even the hedgehog!

'Now, because I have broken the promise with them, demons always come to me, to take me and throw me down. But I fight them with prayer. Prayer is my weapon'.

'Why did I end my promise with them?' Saul said, responding to my question. 'First, I was not having that desire. Two, when you eat the snake, that is the flesh of the demon. That was a problem, because they started disturbing me. Three, I was thrown down with sickness. So I wanted to end the relationship, because there was no reason for it. Lastly, I fought the demons over money. They came and put money inside my hut and when I went to take it, they burned it down. I nearly died, but escaped, and then they attacked me, breaking my leg. That was it, the end of the relationship. Because they give and then they take away, because they need to take back the things they are giving. It is all lies, just to trick'. 'And this injury you see on my shoulder?' said Saul, moving his shirt aside to show me a ragged looking scar, 'that was the work of the demons. And here on my leg'—another scar— 'this too was the demons. Because I was not accepting them they made my motorcycle crash. How do I know it was demons that caused that accident? Because everywhere I go I see pictures of snakes, just there in front of me. But when I sing the name of Jesus Christ they go away. So at the time of the crash, this thing came first. I saw a picture of the snake in front of my eyes, and then the crash. That is how they take people! This is how I know.

'These demons will never stop disturbing. My wife had three children killed in pregnancy. The fourth time she nearly died. But I turned to Jesus and now we have children, because I am a true Christian'.

Significant Ethnographic Observations

Before moving on to the main analysis, there are several important ethnographic observations I want to highlight. First are the frequent references to snake-like creatures. Perhaps the most obvious and relevant snake reference within Christian cosmology is the story of the biblical fall from grace (Genesis 3: 1-24), the moment in which the demonic snake tricks Adam and Eve into breaking their covenant with God, allowing sin to enter the world. This is a defining moment of humanity's long search for salvation, a prerequisite for the biblically condoned future apocalypse with its simultaneous salvation of believers and destruction of the sinful. As such, it is a defining feature of evangelical Christianity and a story well known and oft repeated among the evangelicals in Acholi South Sudan with whom I worked. Moreover, for many African groups, snakes have a strong conceptual connection to poison, sorcery, witchcraft, and the spiritual world (Dalfovo 1998; De Boeck 2005; Evans-Pritchard 1956; Girling 1960; Grove 1919; La Fontaine 1959; Lienhardt 1961; Meyer 1995; Middleton 1965; Seligman and Seligman 1932). Further, stories of the magical power of snakes are common in the community in which I undertook fieldwork, and snakes are linked to several important ancestral or lineage shrines (O'Byrne 2015, 2017).

The narrative presence of alcohol and greed are also important because each is a significant trope in local interpretations about temptation and evil intent mobilised by both evangelical as well as non-evangelical community members. For evangelicals especially, alcohol is seen as a prevalent curse among those tempted by the devil, the root of all contemporary social evil, and a direct cause of adultery, theft, violence, and other mortal sins. Significantly, alcohol is mentioned in two important places in Saul's biography, each of which relates to gaining or using demonic powers. Likewise, Acholi cultural articulations position greed (*woro*) as a particularly problematic social issue, not only a major problem in

local as well as South Sudanese national politics but destructive of social relations in general and also the rationale behind most witchlike deeds (O'Byrne 2015, 2017).

Similarly noteworthy are recurring references to the interlinked themes of silence and a lack of proper greetings. As Porter (2016) emphasises, greetings are vital to Acholi interpretations of a 'correct' social world: an inability to offer correct greetings is a sign of either madness or evil intent, not only equivalent to the denial of sociality and shared humanity but also often regarded as a sure sign of the asocial and secretly sorcerous nature of the denier. Thus in refusing to talk to the gathered crowd Saul socially disengages, a problematic negation of sociality that is in turn compounded by his refusal to offer food to those gathered. These denials of food and greeting alongside a demonstration of greed are a defining moment in his relationships both with his demonic partners and his earthly community: it is only after he has simultaneously mixed proof of greediness with denial of sociality that the church finally steps in and removes his possessions.

Lastly, there is a definite opposition in Saul's narrative between two cosmological domains, both of which are simultaneously ephemeral and solid: that of the sky is a place of thunder and lightning, battle, and decision, while underwater is a place of silence and waiting. Both domains are composed of a certain immateriality—water, wind, sky—and both are marked by ideals and images of passage and movement. However, both are also definitively solid: *te pii* has buildings, trees, and glass, while action in the sky is concretised in the rocky surfaces of nearby mountaintops. These domains not only contrast with each other but with the domain of humans, the place of people and definite solidity, where mobility is difficult. Thus the souls of cattle-people stay with or inside them until the moment they are 'sacrificed' and their soul is taken to work for the demonic. The earth thus opposes *te pii*, and both money and power move vertically (between worlds) as well as horizontally (both globally and in scale) in disembodied yet still personified forms.

Occult Economies of the Demonic System

Just as De Waal (2015) notes for the human world above, there is a hierarchy of nations underwater. Eerily reminiscent of a simplified world systems theory (Wallerstein 2011), demonic power flows alongside global wealth from the powerful nations of the global centre through intermediary transition zones to communities and countries on the peripheries. In this demonic manifestation of the world system, India is a centre of power and dominance (Eni 1987; Meyer 1995). From here evil flows concurrently with goods and money through the ancient Islamic trade city of Mombasa to the waiting markets of the African hinterland, where life is cheap and people have nothing to sell but their spiritual labour.

However, unlike demonic transactions elsewhere (Taussig 1980), I never heard an Acholi say demonic wealth cannot be saved or used for (re)productive purposes. Indeed, it seemed that the lure of demonic wealth was precisely that it could increase and provide interest. Thus, in the demonic transactions of this part of Africa, wealth very definitely breeds power, status, and more wealth. In fact, this is part of its dangerous and seductive evil. It is an empirical fact many of the larger shops in the South Sudanese/Ugandan borderlands sell a variety of imported goods, many of which originate from India and China. Likewise, the owners of these shops often have greater access to money and high-status consumer goods. They are the local success stories of the world system. Further, just as these shop owners are considered to have necessarily engaged in the occult economy to have attained their wealth, so too are other local and national political and economic elite deemed to engage in similarly nefarious activities. 'How else do these people get so much power or money?' my interlocutors rhetorically asked on more than one occasion.

Elements of the occult economy are as critical to these conceptualisations as they are elsewhere in Africa (Bonhomme 2012; Comaroff and Comaroff 1999; Geschiere 1997;

Niehaus 2005). *Te pii* is not only a realm of evil and a place of demons but, significantly, also resolutely contemporary, a perverse analogy of the asociality of African modernity in the world above (Eni 1987; Meyer 1995; Pype 2017). There are offices, taxi parks, workers. Bureaucracy reigns, and correctly completed paperwork is demanded before money or influence will be exchanged for souls. Just as in local government offices in South Sudan's capital city of Juba, people are herded like animals from one department to the next. Waiting is common. Nothing is easy. The asociality of modern interpersonal relations are similarly replicated, the difference being that the faceless and uncaring bureaucracy of the world below is definitively demonic. There people are dehumanised, referred to as cattle, their souls traded like animals. Once sold, they are made to work like animals also, with such cattle-people becoming lifeless while the money given in exchange and taken back to the surface takes on a fully (re)productive life of its own. Later the wealth created below through the ceaseless labours of these spiritless bodies will again be transported back to the land of the living above to procure more 'cattle' for the demonic herd. And so the system continues.

As Jackson (2002) argues with reference to the Holocaust, active engagement in practices resulting in the brutalisation and dehumanisation of another person is ultimately just as dehumanising to the perpetrator as their victim. In this way, the occult economy of *te pii* not only dehumanises the kin, clan and community 'sold' to become cattle but, just as equally, those doing the selling as well (Apter 2012). Such an interpretation is further reinforced by accounts common among evangelical locals and missionaries that link non-Christians and 'traditional African culture' not only with underwater but with a host of other, allegedly demonic (and culturally perverted) activities such as cannibalism, child sacrifice, homosexuality, incest, or paedophilia. Again, this replicates discursive traditions across Africa (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999; Meyer 1995; Middleton 1965; Moore and Sanders 2001; Porter 2016; Stewart and Strathern 2004; White 2000).

There are a number of things to note about the powers available through engagement with the demonic pact, especially how such powers connect to local lives lived on the peripheries of a globally connected world. For example, movement is free and easy, a direct contrast to the everyday realities of contemporary South Sudan. Indeed, the only people in South Sudan considered to move freely are businessmen, foreigners, and politicians, all of whom are thought to be potentially connected with otherworldly as well as earthly sources of money and power. The apparent if transitory freedom of these demon pacts is therefore not only socially stratifying but also repeat symbolic connections between wealth and witchcraft common across Africa.

These global and dimensional flows of power and profit include demonic versions of these forms of cultural flows Appadurai calls 'technoscapes': 'a global configuration, … ever fluid, of technology … [that] moves at high speeds across various kinds of previously impervious boundaries' (1996, 33). In this new global configuration of the multidimensional demonic technoscape(s), computers and mobile phones figure especially strongly, allowing exactly those high-speed boundary crossings that Appadurai notes. Importantly, however, these boundaries are not just spatial—between Africa and India, America and South Sudan— but also between life, death, and dimensions above and below. It is precisely ambiguities such as these that make these technologies inherently dangerous.

Furthermore, the computerised technologies at the heart of the demonic technoscape are of the same configuration that are locally unavailable yet known to be prevalent among the global elite. In fact, in the desperately poverty-stricken farming communities of this rural area, possession of such magical machines might not only be the ultimate manifestation of worldly success but definitive proof of demonic liaison: in other areas of the continent, for example, mobile phones are not only regarded as a somewhat cheap and practical means of communication but, like computers, are also known to allow communication between the

human and the demonic (Bonhomme 2012; Pype 2016, 2017). Similarly, both technologies

are also known to function as demonic traps, luring unwary users to their doom. Indeed, as

Bonhomme suggests for elsewhere in Africa,

> the enchantment of mobile phones does not proceed from a
>
> lack of understanding of modern technology but, on the
>
> contrary, emerges from an acute perception of its
>
> potentialities. *Phones are witchcraft technology by design* …
>
> [and] thus exemplify the occult suspicions that surround, in
>
> the popular imagination, the alliance between new
>
> communication technologies and global capitalism. (2012,
>
> 223-224, emphasis added)

Occult Economies and Demonic Gifts

Much as Piot (1999) points out for the Kabre of highland Togo, in Acholi there is a

significant difference between legitimate and illegitimate exchanges. Legitimate exchange

establishes relations that promote or produce society and culture, while illegitimate

exchanges such as those with demons or witches are ultimately only destructive. As with

similar accounts of satanic dealings elsewhere (Meyer 1995; Taussig 1980; Victor 2019),

Acholi South Sudanese evangelicals were quick to recount stories in which naïve but greedy

individuals make a pact with the devil and later regret that decision. As Bonhomme argues, in

Africa, where witchcraft and perverted gifts are intimately interconnected, such exchanges

are often really 'sacrifices disguised as gifts' (2012, 220). That is, in a version of demonic

alliance that mirrors that narrated by Saul above and is common across the continent, 'instead

of being the beneficiary of a gift, the recipient turns out to serve as an exchange value to pay

a debt, … a total reversal of the logic [of the gift]' (Bonhomme 2012, 220-221). Indeed, as de

Boeck argues about demonic transactions in the Democratic Republic of Congo, 'underneath the visible gift lurks an invisible pattern which corrupts regular patterns of exchange' (2005, 208).

As Geschiere (2013) notes, a rationale of unholy alliance whereby kin are sacrificed for wealth appears to be the insidious contradiction at the heart of witchcraft and demonic exchange across Africa. This contradiction appears in Saul's account as well, but with two crucial twists: not only is the debt paid with the lives of his unborn children, bringing home the treacherous and untrustworthy ambiguities inherent in such dealings, but when he ends his relationship with the demonic the debt transforms into one requiring the life of the pledge-breaker himself. In this way stories of demonic contracts in Acholi South Sudan reiterate similar stories told among African evangelicals elsewhere (Apter 2012; De Boeck 2005). As Piot highlights, 'any gift establishes a relationship—of difference and of hierarchy—between two persons. As such, giving is always tied up with control. … The other is in your debt' (1999, 69-70). As Stroeken notes in relation to witchcraft practices among the Tanzanian Sukuma, such 'debt can mean death' (2010, x).

Thus the lives of Saul's unborn children might well be understood as the final price demanded for the deals he made underwater. This is 'the dark side of social exchange' (Godbout 1998, 558). Such is the cost of reneging on a transaction with the demonic. The anthropological literature is replete with accounts of the obligations created by a 'gift' (Appadurai 1988; Laidlaw 2000; Mauss 1990; Parry 1986; Sahlins 1997). After all, as Mary Douglas famously noted, 'there are no free gifts' (1990, ix). Indeed, the specific details involved in the negative returns of Saul's demonic liaisons suggest that these transactions provide several excellent examples of what Bonhomme has termed a 'dramatic illustration of the crisis of the gift in contemporary Africa' (2012, 221).

The last thing to emphasise about demonic exchange in South Sudan links the ending of Saul's underwater relationship with his refusal of money—the demonic gift. This termination is powerfully symbolic, simultaneously highlighting Saul's refusal both of demonic power over him as well as the purposeful dissolution of his continuing relationship with evil. It is a refusal not only of the power, wealth, and status Saul will (perhaps only temporarily) gain as a consumer of the demonic gift, but also a refusal of the power of the gift itself: the spirit that embodies and enlivens the gift, forming the basis of obligation to partake in ongoing exchange relations. In this way Saul's denial of money is both a denial of the very basis of demonic sociality and a recognition of the inherent deception of demonic aid. Stripped of the thin pretence of altruistic assistance, all that remains of the spirit of the demonic gift is a definitive presentation of evil's true essence: lying, deceiving, attacking, and killing.

Conclusion

The biography presented here raises several epistemological and methodological issues: How are we to make sense of this narrative? How can we comprehend experiences in which our subjects move not only between time and place but different dimensions of thought and existence? How can we conceptualise global flows of wealth and power without understanding cosmological flows of evil, especially as these simultaneously narrate vast colonising networks of monies, moralities, and power? Saul's narrative builds on a widespread 'transnational genre' (White 2000) circulating across Africa since colonial times (Bonhomme 2012; Comaroff and Comaroff 1993, 1999; Niehaus 2005; Stewart and Strathern 2004). However, what the framework of *te pii* has added to the explanatory and moral dimensions of this transnational genre is a millennial and teleological focus: not only do these

immoral things happen and need explaining, but they do so within a linear trajectory toward the approaching Armageddon of which their very presence is substantive proof.

The appearance of Christianity and the resulting demonstration not only of the efficacy of prayer but also the power of good over evil are obvious and foundational elements within Saul's account, as they were in every discussion I heard about the demonic underworld during my fieldwork in Uganda and South Sudan. Across Acholi many evangelical churches are aimed at personal salvation through the neutralisation of demonic influence, of fighting evil and preaching the Gospel so the preacher as well as the listener may become 'saved'. Again, these replicate similar ideas about spiritual warfare that are now common among evangelical discourses across the African continent and exemplified by the great variety of publications ranging in scope from the many small-scale local pamphlets that relate information about how to detect and destroy demonic powers, all the way to the widely published and heavily read Emmanuel Eni's (1987) *Delivered from the Powers of Darkness*,[7] perhaps the most widespread and influential of all (Meyer 1995; Pype 2017).[8]

Likewise, one might argue that there has been a simultaneous demonization and Christianisation of the cosmological and narrative fields not only in Acholi but across Africa more broadly. Folklore, myths, rumours, and stories that once told of other things have now been significantly reoriented toward a Christian mind-set and worldview, narrating the evils of humanity rather than asociality, and telling the listener about the corruption and sin of the world rather than of how to live within it as they once would have. In these Christianised narratives previously ambiguous or nonhuman entities generally become evil (Meyer 1998), and the powers they are deemed capable of reconfigured as proof of witchcraft and the existence of demons, manifesting not only the crisis of the sinning human but also Christianity itself.

Since Saul is an evangelical pastor, it comes as little surprise that Christian understandings of salvation and the demonic are so important within his autobiography. For evangelical Acholi becoming Christian means swapping one social contract for another; the supposedly demonic pact of custom for a personal relationship with Christ. In such a change, the spirit of the gift that demands sociality means that the spirits of the world are replaced by the Holy Spirit. In this existential transaction the temptations of the devil, which become the sins of the human, are surrendered to God through the mediating figure of Christ, to be replaced with the promise of salvation and everlasting life—a different kind and quality of temptation.

In this way, demonic underwater stories like Saul's tell us not only about how global cultural flows of money or power or so on are locally conceptualised, but also about how such flows are managed and understood in the everyday. Furthermore, from such narratives we learn about disparate sociocultural and historical processes. These include such things as the evangelisation of local cosmological systems, entities, and practices; the globalisation of not only money and power but also cosmologies, religions, and their associated meanings and moralities; and indigenous attempts at understanding the wider processes taking place in the meeting of the local and the global, within which local peoples, places, practices, and events are always enfolded and entrapped. In other words, such narratives prove one discursive location for the playing out of the processes involved in globalisation and modernity, as well as for any local—and individual—idiosyncrasies involved in such meetings.

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Notes

[1] All names are pseudonyms.

[2] Because Saul spoke for over three hours and much of what he said was repeated, I have edited his narrative significantly to help with comprehension as well as the constraints of space. Nonetheless, I have attempted to retain anything that seemed important, and when in doubt chose to keep something rather than edit too strongly. I have also tried to maintain a sense of the personal idiosyncrasies of Saul's speech.

[3] Capable of seating fifteen or so people and ubiquitous around central and eastern Africa, a *matatu* (also called a taxi) is a van with three or four rows of seats. It runs both urban and rural routes and is similar to a cheap local bus service.

[4] The term 'Demon King' was the term John used during translation. The Acholi term '*Rwot'* should probably be translated as 'chief' or better 'political leader', although it is applied to any person of high political status, whether king, chief, or colonial officer.

[5] Juba is the capital city of South Sudan. The war referred to is the internal conflict within the Sudanese People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A), which started on 15 December 2013 and has more or less continued since, despite several cease-fire declarations and peace agreements.

[6] Again, Saul means the president of South Sudan, Salva Kiir, and the generals within the SPLM/A.

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[7] This is the autobiographical account of how a former 'demon worshipper' escaped the clutches of evil to become an evangelical minister. Several church leaders mentioned it as compulsory reading on these issues.

[8] A copy of this work can be found at:

http://christendtimeministries.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Delivered-from-the-Powers-of-Darkness-by-Emmanuel-Eni.pdf.