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What is the Source of Power? A Case of the Evangelized Witch in Eastern Uganda*

Kiyoshi UMEYA

……Hey, Hey,
nyeko piny ongoye gima kadhi de bei……
okelo barracks, Hey, kelo meno, Hey, ikelo kwo ababa ongoye gima kadhi ni be……
nyeko piny ongoye gima kadhi ni be……
igeto ri wani waparini wamari onyo pama wapoyi……
baba, wa pari baba, Hey, Hey,
Ababa onyo wa pari baba, Hey, Hey,
Ai baba wa pari baba, Hey, O, baba, ongoye gima kadhi……
kada ma ber, ilaro lowo , Hey, O, baba, ingati loyo, Hey, O, baba, ni be……
Hey, O, baba ongoye gima kadhi ni be, ilaro lowo, Hey, ababa ongoye ingati loyo
Hey ababa……
Hey, ingati goyo kitabo ma Padhola, Hey, ababa meno ma ber rani, Hey, afwoyini
ma, ndiko kitabo omin ani, Hey, ababa ongoye gima kadhi nibe……

[……Hey, Hey,
Nothing is taking place at all, instead wasting the land……
He brought the barracks, Yes, you brought that one, Hey, you brought
the bandits…… Father, nothing is taking place at all. Hey, Hey, you had
been wasting the land. Nothing is taking place at all……Hey, Hey,
You grabbed land, Hey, Oh, father, and you are good at it……
You struggle for land, Oh, father, nobody is better than you, it was you
who leads hey, father……

You printed the book on Padhola Hey, father that is good for me, Hey I thank you for writing a book my brother……Hey, my father, nothing is happening or taking place at all……]

(Local song of Padhola)

I

If you have an opportunity to visit Mulanda sub-county in eastern Uganda, you might be surprised to see a tombstone topped with an enormous cross in the midst of the savannah, surrounded by gardens of cassava and coffee. From the cemetery, on top of the next hill, you can see a compound of several buildings, including an elegant mansion contiguous to a modern chapel, both of them built with bricks (Fig. 3, Fig. 4, and Fig. 6). Enclosed by barbed wire fencing, this microcosm of the modern world covers an area of about 2,000 acres, against a starkly contrasting backdrop of traditional local thatched huts. It is hard not to interpret the barbed wire fence as the boundary between two worlds. You might encounter somebody willing to explain that the buildings were built in the 1960s and 1970s, and their original owner is deceased. Presently, the ‘palace’ is inhabited by the aged widow of the late owner along with some surviving kin (Umeya 2018: 567-639).

Since beginning my fieldwork in 1997¹, I have conducted anthropological research in a certain village in which I reside (Map.1, Fig. 5). This village, a part of Tororo District, is customarily called Padhola, literally ‘the place of Adhola,’ the legendary leader of the migration of the Jopadhola ethnic group from Bahr el Ghazal in South Sudan (Map.2). This journey of the ethnic group is assumed to have occurred in the 16th century (Ogot 1967, Cohen 1968: 153, Umeya 2018: 92-97).²

II

In 1998, when I first informed my neighbours about a plan to visit this 'palace', which is about 20 kilometres away from my host village, they expressed concern. These neighbours acted as my advisers or mentors for village life, and out of respect for their opinions, I refrained from visiting the house on the hill.

I remember their faces clearly as they voiced their complete opposition. One villager said, 'Don't go there. It is absolutely not advisable. If you go there, you will be killed mysteriously. Two residents of the compound were killed by unknown causes. Another one died from a snakebite!' Death from a snakebite implies a bad omen. Others said that 'the palace is cursed'. But who cursed it? And why were the villagers so fearful of the 'palace'? (Umeya 2018: 567-571).

Gradually, I collected biographical information about the late owner of the 'palace'. According to my sources, the owner's initials were 'ACK'. He was born in 1932 in Mulanda and died in 1977³. At the time of my inquiry, I felt somewhat ashamed, as I was ignorant of the history of Uganda. ACK is considered one of the most successful men from Padhola since the 19th century. He is most famous for being an able civil servant under the regime of Apollo Milton Obote⁴.

After the coup d'état in 1971, he was appointed as minister by the new president, Idi Amin Dada⁵. Considered a right-hand man of the notorious president Amin, ACK successively occupied various posts in his cabinet, eventually serving as acting president. Official records from *the Uganda Gazette* endorsed his brilliant career (Fig.1, Fig.2).

He suddenly died in his early 40s under suspicious circumstances while serving as incumbent interior minister. According to an official

announcement by the then government spokesman, ACK was killed on February 17, 1977, in a motor vehicle accident in Kampala after being charged with subversion, along with an archbishop and another cabinet minister. However, most Ugandans believe the accident was ordered by Amin; some even claim that ACK was actually shot in the chest by Amin himself (Umeya 2018: 1-8, 519-532, 619-626; 2019: 151-155).

Another facet of ACK attracted my attention. He dabbled in ethnography, and he wrote a book on the history and customs of his ethnic group, the Jopadhola, which was published in 1960. Although a few reviewers lauded his achievement of bringing the Jopadhola to the public eye, many viewed his work with a contemptuous attitude. Critics believed he fabricated the legitimacy of his own clan as having originally migrated from Busoga by the 'magical power of the printed word' (Kaplan, 2003, Umeya 2018: 532-535).

The most notable information I gathered on ACK was that people considered him as a kind of *jajuok*, which is a vernacular term implying 'witch' or 'night dancer' (the nearest equivalent terms in English). ACK was supposedly a *jajuok* because he built an extraordinary house and even a chapel to magically protect the residents in his compound. The size of the cross on the grave of ACK's father also did not escape the scrutiny of local people.

Further, in discussing ACK's meteoric rise to power, residents would often mention the role of a *jathieth*, a soothsayer known as Ali Obbo.

Although ACK was recognized as an evangelist and thus saved, he was simultaneously considered a witch (i.e. possessing magical knowledge from the West), so he sometimes was called an 'evangelized witch' (Umeya 2018: 535-539).



Fig1. ACK's Official Visit, London, 1972 ©the Ofumbi family

Of course, I am not saying that ACK was a witch. However, it should not be so surprising that the introduction of Christianity—that is, modern—is understood in its own autochthonous category—although of course, the category itself cannot be unchanging. As it is familiar for them to place a magical shrine in the corner of the house, it would not be surprising if the chapel built next to the house were considered to be a similar case.

The villagers' portrayal of ACK reminded me of the description by Cyprian Fisiy and Peter Geschiere, who argue that elite members of society tend to be attacked by neighbours and kin in their homeland. They point

out that:

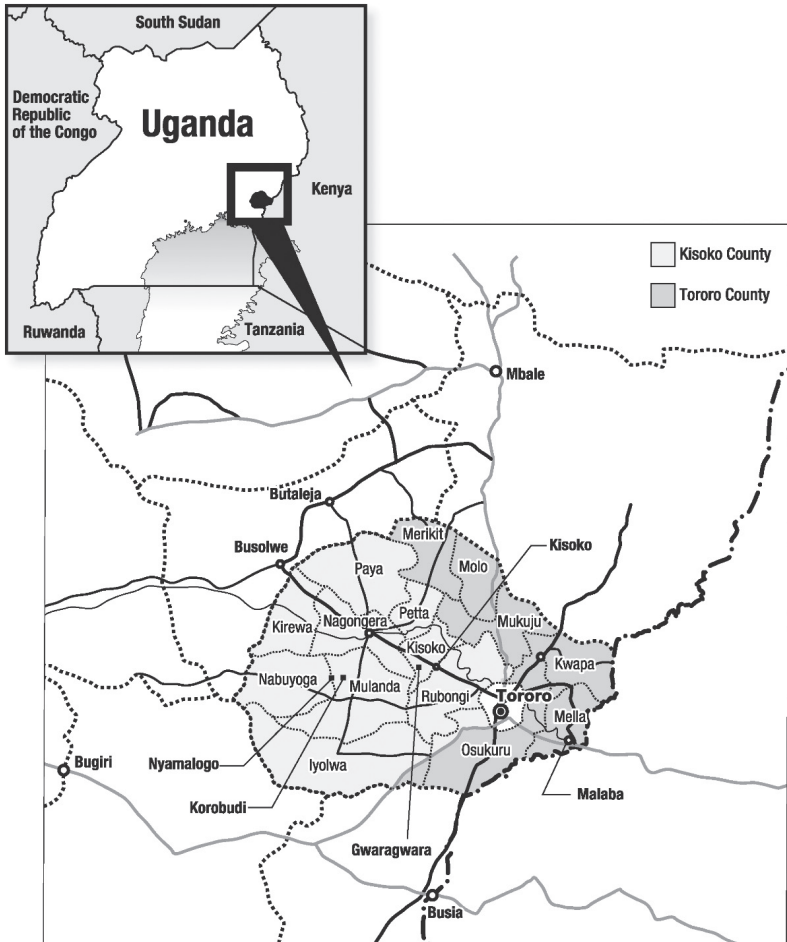
the tombstones in front of every beautiful modern house were the last abode of elites who ventured to build in their home areas, but who were immediately killed by their jealous kin (Fisiy and Geschiere, 2001: 236).

Yet I gathered evidence from locals that neither all elites are viewed as witchcraft practitioners nor are they taken to be witches with regard to Padhola.

One day, while at an Internet café in Tororo Town, I happened to meet one of ACK's sons, who was in exile in the United States until 1998 but chose to reside in the 'palace' (Umeya 2018:546-547). He was very receptive to my research and invited me into the 'cursed palace', where he graciously offered several old corrugated boxes of relics for my perusal. Inside the boxes, I found several volumes of photo albums, diaries, bundled documents compiled by the late ACK, and three film reels.

I found the name of an anthropologist, Aiden Southall, listed in his diary (Umeya 2018: 556-559).

All of these materials were digitized, and copies were given to ACK's family members (Umeya 2011, Umeya 2016; Umeya 2018: 556-559, 562-565). Most of the photo albums and one reel of the film were presented by the government of United Kingdom ACK visited during his lifetime. I assumed they were given to him as part of diplomatic conventions. Documents in a tattered wallet, some of them marked 'confidential', reflected his meteoric rise in Amin's government.



Map 1. Research Area: Kisoko County, Tororo District, Uganda.

Based on Fountain Publishers (2011).

III

From inside the barbed wire fence, ACK might have been taken as a devout Christian—his self-described image—who gave thanks to God on the pages of his journals as well as in the construction of the chapel and the enormous tombstone for his father. However, outside the fence, people in the villages near the compound would not assent to such an idea. These Christian-themed objects were more likely to be taken as proof of his belief in Western *witchcraft* and status as an ‘evangelized witch’ (Umeya 2018: 617-619).



Fig2. ACK with Idi Amin ©the Ofumbi family

I attempted to create a rough draft of a biography of the late ACK by an integrative examination of these materials from inside and outside the fence. The portrait that emerged demonstrates a contradictory character: modern and traditional, brilliant and brutal. In short, his legacy was extraordinarily ambivalent.

A Japadhola resident claimed:

He is *enkwe*. *Enkwe* means trickster in Luganda. We, the Jopadhola, in our language Dhopadola, have a certain term for a trickster, *riekriek*, but it cannot connote the man's affected character. We prefer to use the Luganda word rather than to use Dhopadhola to indicate his personality.

ACK's father was a first-generation Christian in Padhola, known as a lay reader of the Church of Uganda. At the time, people in Padhola resisted a new innovation such as Christianity as new religion or ideology besides the Western administration system via Buganda.

Even today, some pious Christian families, especially Protestant families, realize that intolerant people target them based on their knowledge of Western thought and morality. In the early 20th century, extremist Christians used to kidnap children and take them to school while their parents advocated that they should cultivate the garden instead of wasting time with useless desk studies.

Normally those prominent families are the ones that produced administrative chiefs or officers appointed by Protectorate Governor via Baganda chiefs.

According to oral tradition, ACK's father is the reason that his family is recognized as 'haunted and cursed'.

During the severe famine, known as *kech mawe*, of 1943 to 1944, ACK's father, who was in charge of the school attached to St. Peter's Church in Kisoko, found a man uprooting cassava and filling his sack from the garden belonging to the church. ACK's father was allegedly responsible for beating the thief to death on the spot or incited pupils to do so. In another version of the story, ACK's father was not responsible for the thief's death, but he did

not stop the violence (i.e. he did not save him from the 'mob justice' applied by his pupils). In all events, a man called Okumu was killed. Okumu is the name given to a baby born under an extraordinary pregnancy, the one who is born despite his mother continuing to menstruate; the name is sometimes connected to supernatural powers (Umeya 2018: 535-539, 575-586).

Among the Jopadhola, the spirit of a murdered person is called a *tipo*. This spirit is said to haunt the murderer and his offspring as well as persons involved in the crime, including the person who first found the body, the person who met the murderer for the first time, and the person who entered the house of the victim for the first time after the murder (2018: 243-275).

Studies of neighbouring ethnic groups have shown that a *tipo* is considered a kind of manifestation of *jok* (i.e. the spirit of a human being). Given the difference in meaning for the Jopadhola, this group may be unique among ethnic groups that share the term. Hayley (1947: 16) notes in his classic ethnography of the Langi, '*tipo* is considered as a spark of *jok* power', confirming the description by Driberg, who points out that '*jok* power appear[s] to be universal, formless and limitless, and though the *tipo* may be considered to be a spark of *jok* power, it is at the same time part of the totality of *jok* power' (Driberg 1936: 154).

Among the Jopadhola, the domain of meaning of the term is limited to the spirit of the victim who was murdered. Eluding the attack of a *tipo* over generations is deemed impossible without performing a certain ritual called *kayo choko* (biting bone). To cleanse the spiritual influence and reconcile the two parties (the murderer and the victim), members of both parties must attend the ritual (Umeya 2018: 243-245; 2019: 155-157).

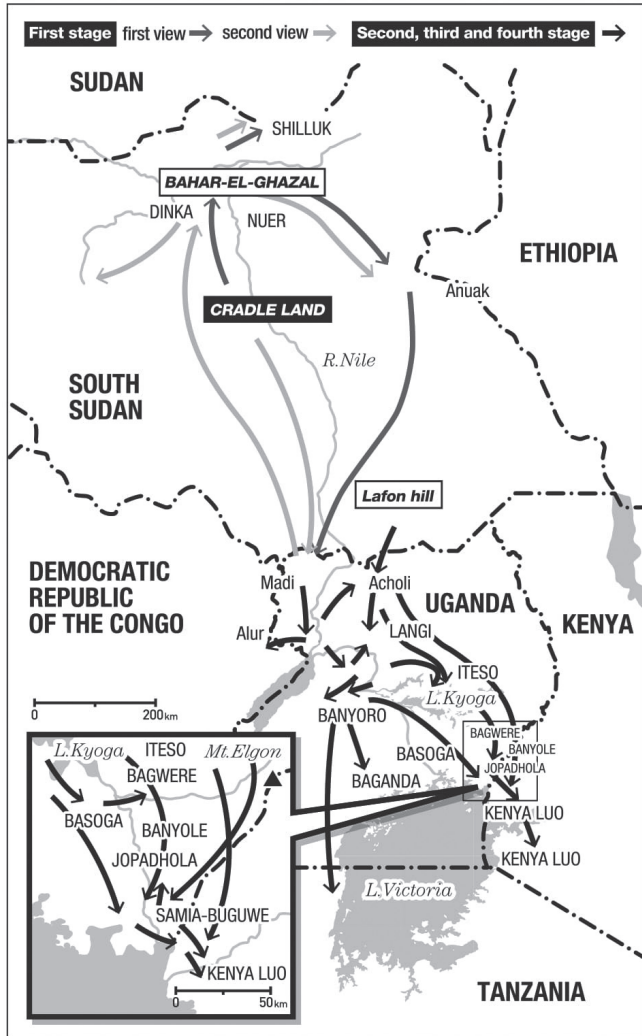
In the case of ACK's father, he made matters worse when he married his second wife, who was from the victim's clan, without performing the

reconciliatory ritual. Although the accuracy of this oral tradition needs to be verified, I am certain that its violation is taken as an abomination (Umeya 2018: 575-586).

As one of the church leaders of a new religion fighting for relevance, ACK's father chose not to fulfil a traditional obligation. Clearly, the traditional way to reconcile with the victim's clan and cleanse the influence of the power of the *tipo* was deemed important by the local community. After all attempts at reconciliation had failed, he died in his early 40s. The archdeacon refused to hold a prayer service for ACK's father because he had a second wife, although some clergymen volunteered to preside over the service and bury him (Umeya 2018: 575-586).

IV

The Jopadhola assume ACK eventually died at the same age as his father. To avoid the 'curse', ACK attempted many things (Umeya 2018: 584). First, he built an enormous tombstone with a cross for his father. Second, he built the chapel as a memory to his late father. At least a Japadhola says, 'In Uganda, memorial chapels are only for saints' (Fig. 8). In my estimation, the Jopadhola interpreted ACK's actions and embraced of Christian symbols such as the cross and chapel as hubris — i.e. as insufficient to cleanse the power of the *tipo* (Umeya 2018: 586-590).



Map.2 Migration Routes of Ethnic Groups. Based on Cohen (1968: 144).

Certainly, this introducer of Christianity performed Christian worship in a unique way. Worship of children who died prematurely within the church, decorating a father who is not a saint in stained glass, and having a huge cross on a father's grave are all unique (Fig.7). However, whether in Italy,

Spain, or France, there is no such thing as genuine ‘Christianity’, and if one looks closely at the worshipped objects in the corners of the church and on the streets, it can be seen that there is intermixing of indigenous folk religions. Even though there the word ‘genuine Christianity’ exists, the practices in everyday life are constantly moving away from it.



Fig.3. Tombstone of Semu Kole Ofumbi, Korobudi ©the Ofumbi family



Fig. 4. ‘Palace’ of ACK, Nyamalogo, Tororo District ©the Ofumbi family

The Jopadhola say the *tipo* of Okumu is not the only one haunting the family. Another one is said to be the *tipo* of the former state minister of

Obote's regime, killed by Amin's agent in 1973 when ACK served as defence minister in Amin's cabinet. The man wanted to be exiled, they say, but ACK stopped him or disturbed the plan, thereby causing his death. ACK was the nephew, or *okewo*, who was supposed to take charge of the funeral rites for the former state minister. However, ACK was absent from the event, which is also a serious transgression. This taboo, of course, is excusable under the logic of Christianity (Umeya 2018: 598-619).

As mentioned above, ACK was said to be guided by a *jathieth* by the name of Ali Obbo, who made possible his meteoric promotion to acting president. For his part, ACK attributed his success to the divine guidance of the church, but his neighbours insist that his accomplishments were the products of witchcraft. In other words, there is a stark contrast in the interpretation of the source of his power, depending on whether the viewer resides inside or outside the barbed wire fence.



Fig.5. Gwaragwara Village, Kisoko Sub-County, Tororo District



Fig. 6. Semu K. Ofumbi Memorial Chapel ©the Ofumbi family

Further, people suspect that ACK seized the land of neighbouring residents. According to a source, ACK wanted to join the land of his father in Korobudi with his land in Nyamalogo and thereby bought the land in between the two areas.

Whether he compensated the affected settlers is not clear. Doubtless, ACK applied considerable force to persuade the landowners to sell their properties. One of the owners had to crawl from Korobudi to Mulanda, a distance of one mile, while another was hit on the back and only survived after being taken to a hospital. Some people point to these events as a cause for the former landowners to endorse the assassination of ACK.

The people that ACK drove away were from the Loli clan, one of the most prominent practitioners of witchcraft in Uganda (Umeya 2018: 590-598). Ironically, in his book published in 1960, ACK described the existence of a Loli sacrificial site in Korobudi: 'Their original place of habitation was Nyamalogo, and later they spread to Korobudi, where there is a sacrificial site on Oyalongoma Rocks' (Oboth-Ofumbi 1960: 58-60; Umeya 2018: 589).

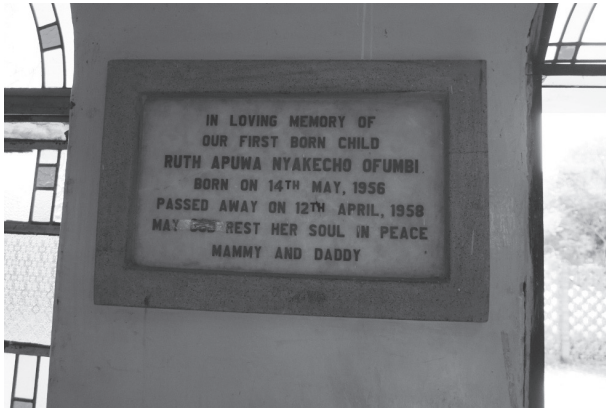


Fig. 7. Marble Monument for the Baby Died Prematurely

©the Ofumbi family

Thus, the fate of ACK might have been from a *lam* (curse) executed by those who were expelled from their own land, according to the Jopadhola.

V

From the collected data, an ambivalent image of ACK emerged: dichotomies of good and bad, modern and traditional, brilliant and miserable, and Western Christianity and African local witchcraft. These dualities cannot be divided exclusively; they seem inextricably interwoven.

To be sure, the evidence does not yield an archetypal individual whose belief in Christianity is pure and in accordance with his essence. As a symbol of Christianity, the cross has its origins in medieval times, but medieval history has no bearing on why the cross was constructed as a gigantic structure in Padhola, Uganda. Is the cross merely a sign of African indigenous witchcraft? If so, its resemblance to the practice of Christianity is uncanny.

I believe all of ACK's public enterprises were officially endorsed by the Church of Uganda, based on the comments of the late Reverend Archbishop Yona Okoth, one of ACK's closest friends. What we have seen is a series of temporal actions, and the objects, as the results of these actions, are open to interpretation. This case study shows a super-diversity of elements and practices in East Africa. There seems to be no apparent and essential origin, no recognition as inventions by themselves, and no territory or border for the practices and practitioners.

The turbulent situation in postcolonial Africa forces us to assume that exemplary objects of Christianity, such as tombstones with crosses, chapels, and even churches, may be appropriable fetish symbols for witchcraft practitioners.

Even if this region's Christianity is seen as having some characteristics, it should not be surprising. The modern concept is basically oriented to 'universal', but at the very time when the concept was invented, it was already destined to be appropriated, localized, and to be indigenous.

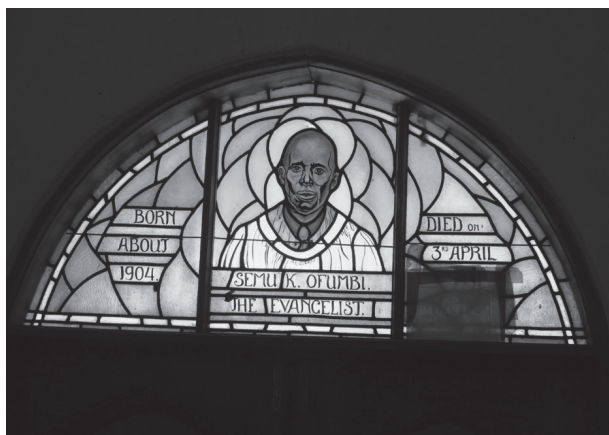


Fig. 8. Stained Glass of Semu Kole Ofumbi ©the Ofumbi family

Following the worldview that we are 'actors' with the agency, even

those objects surrounding us, those connected to the network are good at appropriating the suitable 'art nexus' among the ones connected to them. They are actually good enough to confuse us to make-believe tales ourselves, at least subjectively, fully cursed by modernity. Only the result of 'abduction', the mechanism itself working very well enough to be forgotten by the actors in question in the nexus, is presumed to be observed by anthropologists.

I intend to present here, examining a concrete ethnographic case, my ambiguous position with showing some sympathy for those who support the 'actor-network theory' and Alfred Gell's analysis on 'art nexus' (Gell 1998: 28-65). I think that they are abstractly right, but so what? While the actor-network and art nexus views are immensely intricate on the empirical level, we do not have the means to grasp the total or whole experience of human beings when doing ethnography.

As Rodney Needham asserted about 5 decades ago, 'The solitary comprehensible fact about human experience is that it is incomprehensible' (Needham 1972: 246). A huge number of nexuses of abduction exist, as, for example, between witchcraft and Christianity or other world religions, between alternative and established medicine, and between diviners and news anchors. Again, the question of which nexus of abduction, that is, which part of the network will be active among the uncountable possibilities for a particular actor remains open. Some theorists suggest the existence of a 'black box'. In doing so, they might present theory as omnipotent and underestimate the importance of an analysis based on empirical facts and on a consideration of the intricacy of the human being as an actor; consequently, the risk of being trapped alone in the 'black box' of the actor-network theory is seriously and critically mounting.

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Notes

* The paper was modified from the paper originally read on 6th August 2013 in the Panel G20 (convenors: David Parkin, Akira Okazaki, and Katsuhiko Keida), *Trust in super-diversity*, The 17th World Congress of the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences, 2013, University of Manchester, 5th-10th August 2013.

1 Period of my fieldwork is divided into five phases according to the theme and the investigation framework. First phase: 28 March 1997 to 30 March 1999. Second phase: 14 September 1999, to 25 February 2000. Third phase: 5 July 2001 to 2 September 2003. Fourth phase: 19 August 2004 to 5 September 2015. Fifth phase: 10 March 2016 to 4 September 2018. In the first phase, many parts were spent on adapting to culture and language. In the third phase, ACK in which I had been interested was set at the centre of the investigation. With an investigation covering wide areas using a car for transportation, operation to write out audio material was set on the track. Since the fourth phase, we have been working on checking of accurate information of ethnography while confirming the outline of discussion rather than discovering something new.

Regarding fieldwork, Michael Oloka-Obbo and Paul Owora were engaged in research as collaborators. The two were responsible for much of the selection of informants to my interview, recording, transcription of recorded materials, translation and editing, etc. Many suggestions for the interpretation of the data were received (Umeya 2018: 695-710).

- 2 Jopadhola is an ethnic group generally classified linguistically and culturally as West Nilotes. According to *Ethnologue*, the population is showing an increasing trend with 482,000 persons in the 2014 census (Eberhard, Simons, and Fennig 2019).
- 3 Arphaxad Charles Kole Oboth-Ofumbi (12 July 1932–17 February 1977) was a Japadhola born on 12 July 1932 in Agururu Village, Tororo District, and was baptised on the same day in Mulanda. ‘Oboth’ means ‘a child born in a recently ploughed field’ (the same name as ‘Obote’ among the Langi. Some people view this as a symbol of being linked by fate). He attended Kisoko Primary School (1942–1947), Mbarara High School (1948–1950) and Kings College Budo (1951–1953). He gave up going to university due to father’s death and found employment at Bukedi Co-operative Union as a cooperative assistant (1954–1958) and Bukedi District Commissioner’s Office (1958–1960). Turning to a local administrative position, he became Assistant District Commissioner (ADC) of Acholi District (1963), ADC of Lango District (1963) and District Commissioner (DC) of Acholi District (1963). After independence, he was appointed as Assistant Secretary of the Prime Minister’s Office (1963) and in 1965, the Chief Clerk of the Prime Minister’s Office. By 1971, he was Permanent Secretary for Ministry for Defence (1969). With the establishment of the Amin regime after the coup, he served as Minister of State for Defence (1971) and following a cabinet reshuffle, Defence Minister (1971–1973). Except for the term (1973) when he served as Portfolio Minister of the Departed Asians’ Properties Custodian Board (DAPCB), he was always assigned to a main post in the

Cabinet as Amin's right-hand man: Finance Minister (1974–1976) and Interior Minister (1974–1977). He appointed as the Acting President for nine days during foreign trips of the President (1972).

4 Apollo Milton Obote (28 December 1925–10 October 2005) was born at Akokoro village in Apac district in northern Uganda. His father was the local chief of the Langi. He graduated from the Protestant Missionary School in Lira, Gulu Junior Secondary School, Busoga College and Makerere University. He led Uganda to independence in 1962 from British colonial administration. Following the independence, he served as Prime Minister (1962–1966) and eventually President (1966–1971, 1980–1985).

5 There are various opinions concerning the year of birth of Idi Amin Dada Oumee (c.1925–6 August 2003). He is said to be from Koboko, West Nile District. Born to a Kakwa father and Lugbara mother, he grew up as a community called 'Nubi' that crossed 'ethnic groups' and was connected by Islam. He was enlisted in King's African Rifles (KAR) and is said to have participated in the Burmese front and suppression of the Mau Mau rebels. During the Protectorate era, one of the only two Ugandan officers promoted to commissioned officer status by the British Empire. The self-bestowed title that he also forced others to call him was 'His Excellency, President for Life, Field Marshal Al-Hajji Doctor Idi Amin Dada, VC, DSO, MC, Conqueror of the British Empire in Africa in General and Uganda in Particular'. However, there is no record that Amin was ever conferred these awards. He was President from 1 January 1971 after seizing power from President Obote in a coup d'état, until 11 April 1979 when dismissed by the rebel army with the cooperation of the Tanzanian army. Subsequently, he went into exile in Saudi Arabia. He kept his promise and maintained his silence. In early July 2003, it was reported that he was on his deathbed. He weighed more than 220 kg, and kidney transplantation was performed twice but with no success. Amin died at 7:00 am (East Africa

time) on 16 August 2003. He was the only former head of the state of Uganda not to receive a state funeral.

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A Case of the Evangelized Witch in Eastern Uganda

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In this paper, while reflecting on my fieldwork experience, I attempt to consider the actual historical situation of the ironical encounter that appeared when modernity was brought to eastern Uganda, examining a case of Christian family as an example. Through the case of a famous politician who was allegedly murdered by President Idi Amin Dada, there is an irony that can be interpreted from the perspectives of autochthonous witchcraft, the more he devoted to Christianity. This case is highly suggestive as a test case for the obscurity of modernity. By scrutinizing this case, the following suggestive assertions were made.

- Although it is necessary to admit the effectiveness of concepts such as actors, networks, offered by ANT and even 'abduction,' the human experience is so complex that it is impossible to comprehend the totality of all relationships from such standpoints.

- All modern concepts are oriented towards universality but have the fate of being contextualized from the invented side to the locality.

- As the actor-network theorists indicate the 'black box' function can be observed in any place.

It is solely substantial not to regard certain theoretical positions as 'black box', including the one of actor-network theory to guarantee the wholesome social analysis.

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