Chapter 9
Creating the New Times:
Reburials after War in Northern Uganda

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This chapter explores the creation of temporal beginnings and continuities through reburials in Northern Uganda. After 22 years of armed conflict, the Acholi are moving from Internally Displaced People’s camps back to their rural villages. In the process, they must deal with bones that are out of place in order to usher in a new time. During the years of conflict, survivors have buried most of their dead within the camps on land that does not belong to their own clans. In Acholi cosmology this constitutes serious disorder as the dead are supposed to return to patrilineal clan land to join the living family as well as ancestral spirits. The dead are being exhumed and reburied in their proper homes, not only to create spatial order, but also, we argue, to create and re-create temporal order. The bones are associated with the spirits (tipu) of the dead, who are said to be dissatisfied if not taken home. Meanwhile, as people begin to clear bush to start farming again, they sometimes find the bones of unknown fighters killed in the war. These remains need special rituals in order to avert the dangerous spirits (cen) of those who died badly with no one to take them home for burial.

We explore these processes and rituals of exhumation, reburial and cleansing as social technologies of time manipulation. As in other aspects of Acholi cosmology, sequence and timing are fundamental. In their disposition of bones, people are attempting to achieve durability and permanence, on the one hand, and to achieve endings to disorder and beginnings of new, peaceful, times on the other.

Since Robert Hertz’s famous essay on death, first published in 1907, scholars have attended to the relation between time, the decomposition of the material corpse, and the regeneration of society and social values, sometimes enacted by dealing with the bones. In the specific historical context of Northern Uganda, where so many people died from violence and disease and were buried ‘wrongly’, this relationship has taken on special and urgent significance. The reburial of the bones in the ancestral land creates material continuity between land and people, as well as between the living and the dead, which makes new life possible, and at the same time confirms a family’s claim on the land. The exhumation and re-interment of bones in their proper homes are in this sense a specific technology of time. They mark not only the transition to the status of ancestor, but also the re-establishment of a home after years in the camp, and a future on the land for the coming generations. Reburial of bones thus links different temporalities in past, present and future: the
final end of a living relative, the beginning of a new life on ancestral land, and the continuity of kinship values and entrustment of land into the future.

Rather than giving a generalised description of reburial practices in Northern Uganda, we proceed by presenting a specific case in detail in order to excavate the particularities of the timework put in place in this specific situation. This is followed by a contextualised analysis and conclusion regarding the grasping of time through the materialities of death.

**Bringing the Dead Home**

It is early morning in a neighbourhood in Gulu town in Northern Uganda. A group of men from Otto Samuel’s family is gathered behind one of the round huts at the place where Samuel’s brother, Michael Opoka, has been buried since 1995. Michael, a government soldier, was shot by the rebels near Sir Samuel Baker’s Fort when he was 35 years old. The army took his body to Gulu town for burial because the war prevented burial at his rural home.

An opportunity has now come and it is time to bring Michael’s remains back to the family home. The men have brought hoes for digging, a goat and a knife for making a sacrifice, and two sacks for carrying the remains of Michael Opoka and the sacrificed goat. They start digging and reach a cavity that had contained the coffin, which has now rotted away. More men have turned up at the gravesite. They are all in their fifties or sixties. One man has come because he was the parish chief who buried Michael Opoka 16 years ago.

A piece of blue blanket is uncovered in the grave, and the men start digging carefully with their hands. When the entire body is free from soil, four men lift the remains out of the grave. There is little left inside the blue blanket but the bones and the skull. The men put them, unceremoniously, in a white sack, feet first, and stuff in all the bits of coffin they have dug up too. The bag, now containing the remains of Opoka, is put aside, up against the hut, and they all turn to the next job. A small boy is standing by the grave holding a goat on a rope. It is nibbling on some grass, oblivious of what is to come.

One of the diggers drags the goat closer to the grave and, with the help of Opoka’s son, makes the goat lie down and cuts its throat with a small blunt knife. The pulsing of red blood on the man’s dusty hands and on the ground makes a sharp colour contrast. The man opens the stomach of the goat, takes a bit of green chyme from the intestine, and sprinkles it thrice into the grave snapping his fingers. His movements are quick and professional; there is very little solemnity about the situation and he does not say anything. The bones of Opoka in the white sack and the slaughtered goat in the other are placed in the back of the car. Opoka’s son and one of the diggers come along in the car with the bones and the goat. They are not supposed to stop on the way, but they make a halt at the market to buy a white sheet for wrapping the bones to be placed in the new grave. They drive in near silence the 47 km to Samuel’s home in Onguti village.
A large group of people is congregated in the home. Men are sitting on benches, and a group is standing around the new grave, among them Otto Samuel himself. The hole has already been dug, a large mound of red earth on each side of it. A pile of red bricks has also been placed next to the grave. The women of the family sit on a mat in the shade of a small tree, close to the new grave. Among them is Samuel’s elderly mother, born in 1911. The sack with Opoka’s bones is brought to a large papyrus mat where the bones are rearranged and folded into the new white sheet. The skull rolls out, but is put back into the package together with the pieces from the old coffin. The bones are wrapped as a body and carefully lifted into the grave. The soil and pieces of the old coffin left on the papyrus mat are poured into the grave and the men start filling the grave with soil. They finish the new grave with a neat layer of bricks. Meanwhile the goat’s meat is being prepared for a meal. Samuel says that they are now relieved and it is time for the family to eat and drink and celebrate that their family member, Michael Opoka, has finally come home.¹

¹ This reburial was observed and video filmed by Sophie Hooge Seebach, who is a student doing fieldwork in the area on issues related to death; she was also a field assistant on the project at the time. We draw upon her field notes from this reburial as well as our notes from several interviews and visits with the family.
Figure 9.2 Taking the sack of bones, followed by the sack with the sacrificed goat, to the vehicle (photograph by Sophie Hooge Seebach)

Figure 9.3 Rearranging the bones and skull in a new sheet before reburial in the home (photograph by Sophie Hooge Seebach)

Figure 9.4 The remains have been reorganised as a body ready for replacement in ancestral soil (photograph by Sophie Hooge Seebach)
Otto Samuel is 69 years old, a farmer and carpenter who lives in Onguti village in Awach sub-county with his old mother, his brothers, his children and his sister. They moved back to this home after the Internally Displaced People’s camp in Awach was closed in 2008. In this family, as in many others, the older men went back to the original homes first, followed by the women and children. The family members who had died during the conflict and were buried in the camp remained there for three more years and were brought home in 2011. In addition to Michael Opoka, Otto Samuel’s family reburied a foetus and three men – a father’s brother, a brother and a sister’s son – who had been left in the camp.

Otto Samuel explained that some time after they moved back to the village, a bicycle fell and broke his granddaughter’s leg, which did not heal well. Some of the family members found the incident disturbing and went to an ajwaka (diviner) to enquire. The ajwaka divined the case and found that it was the old Mzee (an elder from their family, a father’s brother to Samuel) buried in Awach who was complaining: ‘It is me, you should take me back.’ The family organised to exhume him from the ex-camp in Awach. They sacrificed a male goat and made a new grave for Mzee at a proper distance from the house. On top they planted a tamarind tree, because he had died from leprosy; this tree, said Samuel, is a sign that will make the future generations know that this grandfather was a leper. After the reburial there had been no more accidents in the family, said Samuel.

On the same day two more men and a male foetus were reburied; one sacrificed goat can serve for several exhumations as long as it is of the same sex as the deceased, so there was an economy of scale in dealing with all the males at once. One of them was Samuel’s brother, who was 54 years old when he died from illness in the camp. He was reburied in the village home, on the opposite side of the houses from the leprosy grave. Behind his grave, towards the grandmother’s house, was another grave, barely visible for the sweet potatoes growing around
and on top of it. Samuel spoke very quietly about this grave, as if to avoid being overheard. It was the grave of his sister’s son who died when he was 27 years old. He had been a rebel leader of high rank, but had deserted the rebel army during the conflict. One day a government soldier shot him when he was riding on a boda, a bicycle-taxi, in Awach camp. Samuel said that the soldier must have recognised him from when he was a rebel leader, but he had become a civilian and there was an amnesty so they were not supposed to shoot him. Samuel explained that the family was planning to ask for compensation from the government, because the army killed their nephew unlawfully, but Samuel doubted the government would pay it. The nephew had lost his parents early in life, so Samuel had been taking care of him and that is why he was reburied at Samuel’s home. A male foetus, which had first been buried in Awach IDP camp was also exhumed and reburied in the home, at the veranda of the house of its parents.

Burials and the Temporality of Corpses

The specific historical context of Northern Uganda, where hundreds of thousands of people died from violence and disease and were buried ‘out of place’ in Internally Displaced People’s camps, adds a new facet to the classic anthropological research on burials and death. We will argue that the reburials of these displaced remains may be seen as a specific kind of timework. Like all steps in the cycle of funerary rituals, they deal with the process of individual dissolution and social continuity. They also refigure history by creating a new epoch and attempting to elide a period of terrible disruption.

In his seminal essay on death, Robert Hertz urged us to pay attention to what happens to the corpse over time, and he was a pioneer in theorising how the temporal decomposition of the material corpse relates to conceptions of the soul and the afterworld, that is, how the material and the spiritual are two sides of the same dead body. The significance of the corpse in burial rituals is that in dealing with the material remains people can deal with the spiritual as well. By acting on the tangible and visible corpse and its decomposition, they make the intangibility and invisibility of the soul and its transformation more comprehensible. Hertz wrote:

there is a close relationship between the representations of the body and that of the soul. This mental connection is necessary, not only because collective thought is primarily concrete and incapable of conceiving a purely spiritual existence, but above all because it has a profoundly stimulating and dramatic character … The material on which the collective activity will act after the death, and which will be the object of the rites, is naturally the very body of the deceased. The integration of the deceased into the invisible society will not be effected unless his material remains are united with that of his forefathers. It is the action of society on the body that gives full reality to the imagined drama of the soul. (1960: 83)
Taking our cue from Hertz we focus our attention on the destiny of the corpse, but we expand on the temporal aspects of burial rituals. We argue that in the reburials in Northern Uganda people deal not only with the intangibility of the spiritual, but also with the intangibility of the temporal. Transience, permanence, durability and finality are difficult phenomena to grasp, but made evident in death, burials and not least in reburials. We suggest seeing the re-placement of bones and graves in Northern Uganda as a kind of timework through which people deal with and appropriate different temporalities. We are interested in the concrete activities and necessary materials, but also in the procedures, which involve ordered steps, duration, frequency, sequence and timing.

We borrow the notion of timework from Michael Flaherty who describes timework as ‘intra-personal and inter-personal effort directed toward provoking or preventing various temporal experiences’ (2011: 11). Whereas Flaherty is interested in self-selected agentic micro-management of temporal experience (inspired by Goffman’s interest in Face-Work), our attention is primarily directed towards the socialities and collective frames of timework involved in reburials. The re-placement of bones and graves in the geographical and social landscape, the ordering of hierarchies and sequences by placing bones in patterns of proximity, distance and orientation, are ways of understanding and doing time through place and materials.

British anthropologists who studied funeral practices were heavily influenced by Hertz. They tended to take the Durkheimian strand in Hertz’s work, that is, the centrality of the social, though unlike Hertz, they did not see society as an actor: ‘it is not so much a question of Hertz’s reified “society” responding to the “sacrlige” of death, as of the mortuary rituals themselves being an occasion for creating that “society” as an apparently external force’ (Bloch and Parry 1982: 6). Goody’s (1962) formidable study of death rituals and intergenerational transmission of property rights among the LoDagaa of West Africa, and Bloch’s monograph on burial rituals of the Merina of Madagascar, were about the re-creation of social forms and values through ritual management of death. These themes were sharpened in the collection entitled Death and the Regeneration of Life (Bloch and Parry 1982) in which the editors argue that death is the beginning of a ritual process of regeneration, overcoming individual biological mortality by reasserting lasting fundamental social values. In a recent edited volume on funerals in Africa, Jindra and Noret remind us that burials are often key cultural events in which people invest large sums of money and effort so as to conduct them in ‘the right way’ – and what is considered ‘right’ undergoes remarkable historical change. Importantly, they also point out, in contrast to the older Durkheimian-inspired analyses of funerals, that burials are not only moments of social re-integration in the face of death, but are occasions for both (re)production and (un)making of solidarities and hierarchies, alliances and conflict (Jindra and Noret 2011: 2) We acknowledge our indebtedness to these social anthropological studies of funeral rituals, but we need other analytical tools as well to do justice to the conditions in which a whole generation of people like Otto Samuel are trying to get on with their lives and create a new epoch in history.
What we suggest here is that the reburials in Acholiland accomplish timework in two different scales simultaneously. On the one hand, they fit into the cycle of funeral ceremonies that deal with the temporal processes of material decomposition, spiritual transformation and social regeneration. They ensure the continuity of the shades in the community of the living on a personal familial scale, in the ways that Bloch and Parry (1982) highlight. On the other hand, these reburials are occurring in a particular historical and political context, and they work upon a broader scale to create a new epoch in Acholi history.

In her book on reburial and postsocialist change, Verdery argues that the materiality of dead bodies makes them potent means of reconfiguring time: ‘Bodies have the advantage of concreteness that nonetheless transcends time, making past immediately present’ (Verdery 1999: 27). She acknowledges the personal and familial temporality of a dead body, which recollects a life with others, processes of growth and aging, the punctuation of death, the moral imperative of proper burial, the continuing respect for the memory or soul of the deceased. But she is most concerned with the way this scale of temporality is conflated with and vitalises the politics of historical transformation. Under conditions of radical political change, reburials can work upon the very understanding of temporal process and the shape of history (Verdery 1999: 115). The sense of history takes on an aura of truth and reality made tangible in the bones: ‘Manipulating physical remains is a visual and visceral experience that seems to offer true access to the past’ (Verdery 1999: 113). Reburials on a large scale allow people to excise a portion of the past, to bracket it as an aberration that can be cut out, so that they can ‘repossess a “normal” past and weave it into “normal” presents and futures’ (Verdery 1999: 116). Moreover, they give another shape to history by enacting notions of genealogies that are inclusive, but also exclusive. Compared to the broad community of the camps, the kin groups who mobilise to rebury their dead are narrow; but their depth is greater than the temporal frame of war and encampment. Reburials place the dead in a context of ancestors and descendants, with a past and a future that were amputated in the camps.

Return Time and the Remaining Remains

The war between the insurgent Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) and the national Uganda Peoples’ Defence Force (UPDF) was fought most bitterly in Acholiland. Although the fighting spread east to where the Langi and Teso people lived, and north to the Sudan where the LRA had important bases, it was the Acholi region that suffered longest. Beginning in the 1990s the UPDF adopted the strategy of forcing the civilian population into Internally Displaced People’s camps established around trading centres and schools. By 2006, when the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement was signed in Juba, about 95 per cent of the population, nearly two million people, were living in these congested conglomerations of thatched huts. In principle, the camps were for the protection of civilians, and each was defended
by a detach of UPDF soldiers. Camp perimeters were sharply defined and ‘for their own safety’ people were subjected to strict curfews; they were only allowed to cultivate and collect firewood within a few kilometres of the camp, near the roads that were patrolled by the UPDF (Dolan 2009: 119). In practice, the UPDF was unable to protect the camp residents from abduction and killing; not only were the soldiers ineffective, they were widely feared for their harsh methods. The government forces suspected locals of aiding the enemy, since the LRA consisted almost entirely of Acholi; some had joined voluntarily and many had been forcibly impressed. The LRA war was a civil war with Acholi families involved on both sides, and, like the family of Samuel Otto, suffering losses to both armies.

For up to two decades in some areas, people were confined, not to some safe place away from the fighting, but within the war zone, caught between the LRA and the UPDF, close to their homes, but forbidden to return to them. During lulls in the fighting, people moved to other camps to join relatives; convoys allowed some movement along the main roads. But for most Acholi, the years of the war were years of immobility and dependence on food rations from the World Food Programme. The deprivation, humiliation and uncertainty of those years have been described by researchers (Finnström 2008; Dolan 2009; Branch 2011), but the problem of burying the dead has hardly been mentioned. Unable to return to their homes to place their dead where they belonged, people had to dig graves in the camps. Those who died violently, children who succumbed to malaria or malnutrition, adults who surrendered to AIDS, aborted foetuses, stillbirths and old people whose lives ended in the camps: all had to be interred in soil that belonged to someone else. While some of the IDP huts were put up on land belonging to churches, schools, health units or government, most were on the property of families who happened to live in the areas gazetted as camps. There were no designated cemeteries in the camps. The landowners had to accept, not only the huts that were erected on their land, but the growing number of graves between them. Women were buried behind the house near the fireplace, men in the front, miscarriages and stillbirths next to the wall of the hut. Graves were marked by stones and bricks, occasionally by a cemented tombstone.

From 2006, the camp policy changed. Greater security prevailed and the authorities opened ‘satellite camps’ or ‘transit sites’ so that people could move out of the crowded main camps to locations closer to their land. The idea was that they could start clearing, cultivating and building houses on their ‘ancestral land’ while enjoying the relative safety of the satellite camps. Return time had its own rhythm. People waited for the dry season when thatching grass was easily available. Often some members of the family moved back first, leaving children in the camps close to their schools. Those without strength or resources to build their own huts had to wait. In many areas, water supplies, schools and health facilities had to be re-established before the whole family could return. People hesitated because they feared that security was not assured; Joseph Kony, the LRA leader, was still alive. They were also worried about cen, the spirits of the unknown dead, whose remains were sometimes found on the land to which they were returning. The cleansing
of rural areas in order to make them fit for farming and building was part of the rhythm of return for some villagers.

Acholi people explain that when someone dies, the *tipo*, the shadow or shade, remains near the corpse. Working on the dead body properly involves burying it at home and calling the shade to come home (*omo tipo pa lato*). Exactly where the shade stays, whether inside the house, near the grave, in trees, or in the *abila* shrine, is vague. One woman dismissed our too literal interest in location: ‘How can you know where the *tipo* stays—it is not seen.’ The important thing is that it protects the home, and that it is associated with the corpse. Labol Jenipher, a diviner, explained that in life spirits are within us, ‘like if we dream’. ‘But when I die the *tipo* keeps on checking: “Is the flesh there? Are the bones there?”’ People described to us how corpses should be buried on their sides, facing into the compound. In the same way, the shades should be oriented to the home and its well-being.

The dark inverse of the well-disposed shade is the spirit of a person who died badly and was never brought home to be buried. The *cen* is annoyed and resentful; it could be someone who was murdered or who died after being poorly treated. Spirits of the vengeful dead that afflict the living are known in many parts of East Africa; but in Acholiland they are particularly associated with unclaimed, unburied bones in the bush. In Paibona, we heard of returnees coming across skeletons with gum boots or tattered bits of clothing suggesting they had been LRA fighters. People explained that the LRA left their dead where they fell; several whose abducted family members had died in the bush recounted sadly that their bodies must be rotting somewhere in the hills. Inadvertently stumbling on such remains can cause misfortune, often in the form of strange behaviour, possession or madness. The link between the material remains and the bitter spirit of the dead was emphasised by the required response to such a discovery: place a leaf on the bones and say ‘I bury you’ and perhaps also, ‘I am not the one who killed you’ (Finnström 2008: 88). It was those who returned to the villages first who had experiences of *cen*. When bones were found, or sometimes even when they were only suspected to be in the area, a cleansing ceremony (*moyo kabedo*) was organised on a community basis. The required sheep or goats were subsidised by USAID in some cases as part of donor support to the return process.

Far more common, however, are the continuing efforts to deal with the known dead who were buried and whose bones and shades should return to their villages, just as their living relatives are doing. This work is a family matter; it is the close relatives of the deceased who must acquire the goat to be sacrificed and organise the people to carry out the tasks. Very many families have left graves behind in the former camps. It is not so much that the shades of these dead are vengeful and frightening like the *cen* in the bush – though misfortunes can be attributed to their displeasure as we saw in the case of Samuel Otto. Rather there is a sense that return is not finished until the bones and *tipo* of the dead come home. *Cen* are spirits of those who have been wronged, whose bodies were abandoned. They are the negative image of the moral imperative to care for the material and immaterial remains of the
dead. Exhuming the remains and reburying them at home shows that you respect and love your relatives – that you have not neglected or abandoned them.

The timing of exhumation and reburial varies according to family finances, misfortunes attributed to the shades, and pressures exerted by the owners of the land in the IDP camp. Some brought the dead home soon after they themselves returned; one man told how, pressed by the landowner in the camp, he brought four corpses in one day, each rolled in two sheets and a papyrus mat and carried on the back of a bicycle. Others had reburied only some of their dead relatives and had definite plans for the return of the remaining remains. Many asserted that they wanted to move the dead, but lacked the means to do so and thus could not set a definite time. One man, still living in the former IDP camp because he had not yet completed houses in the village, recounted that all of his dead relatives had been exhumed. Now he was surrounded by their open empty graves and longed for the day when he would join the whole family, living and dead, in their ancestral village.

For those who were returning, moving the remains of the dead was part of the process: ‘Otherwise you feel that you have left something undone.’ It was also important for those upon whose land the dead of other families had been interred. Landowners in Awach, a former IDP camp, could count the number of graves remaining on their land. One woman told how she had been round to visit the village homes of those who had stayed on her land to request them to come back for their dead. Although many landowners were sympathetic, they found it awkward to host the bones of the displaced dead. The reasons were several. One schoolteacher explained that his wife was afraid to dig near the graves for fear of the shades that might be hanging about. To drive a plough or tractor over a grave would be disrespectful. Nor could one build on the spot. Potential buyers would not want to purchase land with graves. The shades might be dissatisfied and disturb the landowners. Most of all, the dead should be with their own relatives. Only in cases where the deceased were of the same clan as the landowner, did both landowner and bereaved family agree that the remains might remain where they were.

Ritual Chronology: The Work of Burying and Reburying

Reburials can be seen in the context of normal burials. Our informants, and other researchers (Odoki 1997), describe the sequence of funeral rituals in Acholiland: first there is the ritual of burying the corpse (iko liel) with its necessary steps including the calling home of the shade; then the second funeral rite of ‘smearing the grave’ (puyo liel) after three or four days, which confirms the death and the place of the tipu and cleanses the mourners; and finally the last funeral rites of memorial, which might be delayed up to 10 years or postponed indefinitely, depending on the status of the deceased and the wherewithal of the family. These events establish a characteristic temporal order and rhythm in death and interment, which resemble the process that Hertz (1960) describes so insightfully, and establish a connection
between soil time and soul time as the flesh decomposes in the earth. From the moment of death, a state of liminality prevails that only ends provisionally with the smearing of the grave, which cleanses the grave diggers and their tools, and permits normal life to recommence.

Unlike the Dayak people of Borneo, about whom Hertz wrote, or the Merino of Madagascar (Bloch 1971), Acholi did not practice reburial as part of their ordinary funeral cycles, until it became common practice because of the war. However, there was and is still an important exception. The children of Jok (latino jok) are special people—twins, children who are born in breech position, with three nipples, an extra set of little fingers or another unusual corporeal mark. They possess or are connected to special powers, and are believed to have hot spirits. For that reason they always need to be reburied. After a normal first burial, they are left in the soil for about a year until only the bones remain. After this period of soil time, the children of Jok are exhumed and their bones are put in pots with holes for ventilation and vision, and the pots are placed in the middle of the compound, where they can 'keep an eye' on the home. Other corpses, besides those of Jok's children, were occasionally moved, as well. Thus, the practice of exhumation and re-interment was not unknown to Acholi people, even before the current wave of reburials. Perhaps the post-conflict reburials might count as invention of tradition (Hobsbawn and Ranger 1983), but they also resonate with older continuing practices. In any case, some people already had experience handling bones of the dead.

The ongoing reburials in Acholiland are so clearly about creating order in space: the dead lying in strangers' land are 'matter out of place', which constitute potential disturbance as the dead are supposed to be buried in patrilineal clan land. But it is not enough to bury them on clan land. When they are re-placed in families' original homesteads, they re-create social orders and hierarchies. The spatial patterns of placing graves vary among clans, but most put children and foetuses close to the house, women near the kitchen and men closer to the road. Graves are usually oriented east-west and some Acholi explain that this is parallel to the path of the sun from sunrise to sunset. Special people, such as twins, or those who died special deaths, such as from leprosy, are placed differently (Odoki 1997). These patterns were followed in reburials too, as we saw in the case of Otto Samuel's family members. (Another family told us that all their reburied dead were placed facing inward to the compound, except those of a murdered man whose face was oriented outwards towards the bush, so his shade could go looking for his murderer.) The ordering of space with the graves in the homesteads is material and permanently visible. But the ordering of time is chronologically tangible only

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2 The power called Jok in Nilotic languages has been discussed by many scholars, and is reviewed by p'Bitek (1971). Mogensen writes: 'The Nilotic notion of jok has been used to emphasize that complex cosmological and philosophical systems did exist in pre-colonial Africa. While missionaries searched for ways to translate “God” and communicate with people about Christianity, ethnographers (and others) have sought logic and coherence through interpretations of juok in terms of universal force or “power”' (Mogensen 2002).
in the process of exhuming and reburying. Afterwards several temporalities are conflated, as we suggest below.

Everyone we have talked to affirmed that eventually they want to bring their dead home (unless they are buried on the land of a clansman). However, as long as the graves, the remains and *tipo* of the dead are not disturbed or disturbing, people can bide their time, waiting to assemble the necessary resources. Other concerns may be more urgent. What triggers the initiation of reburial varies: an opportunity arises; the landowner makes trouble; or misfortune strikes among living relatives — as in Otto Samuel’s case. This changes the urgency and timing perspective: a ritual chronology starts which is distinct from everyday rhythms and occurrences. If ritual time is set in motion by a misfortune, the first move often includes a visit to a diviner, who will identify causes and suggest measures to alleviate the affliction. The diviner might find that problems are caused by dead shades longing to go home to be among and honoured by the living, like Samuel’s uncle who communicated, ‘It is me, you should take me back’.

The order in which the dead are brought home differs among families, but there is a general consensus that order is significant. Many families specify that the order must follow the chronology of deaths: the person who died first has to be brought back first, followed by the one who died next, etc. Age, gender and status make no difference; a foetus can be returned before an elder. In this way the reburials recollect the time lived during the war as a material death calendar. But once interment is complete, of course, they are all simultaneously present in the home. In other families, however, it appears that status and male gender have been given chronological priority.

When sequence is determined, relatives start searching for the ritual resources for doing the reburial: a goat for sacrificing, money for transport of the body, alcohol, food for the celebration. Announcements have to be made to relatives travelling from afar to participate in the ritual. The preparation time for organising the ritual is often stressful and there is a risk that things get stuck because people cannot afford the sacrifice or the transport or something interferes with the process. When matters go right and all elements are finally ready, there should be no hesitation, the ritual must happen. The *tipo* of the dead will get impatient if people delay the ritual for no reason. There is a sense of urgency and attention to rules and sequences that must be followed. The ceremony is organised in sequences that vary in length and intensity: digging for the bones, exhuming the bones, sacrificing the goat, transporting bones and sacrifice, burying in the new grave, celebration and cleansing of the vehicle utilised. Some sequences take a long time but carry little significance (such as the digging) other sequences are short but semantically intense (such as the ritual killing). The ritual intensifies when the remains in the grave appear and a sense of procedural necessity persists until the bones are back in the soil. The procedural ordering during this phase of the ritual is emphasised by repetition and differentiation: the chyme from the goat is sprinkled thrice in the grave for a man and four times for a woman, a pattern that is repeated in the new grave, but with soil.
In terms of ritual time in this rite of passage, the transport of the remains is a phase of liminality, as Van Gennep (1960 [1909]) would have put it. The risk during this phase of being betwixt and between is that the *tipo* which hangs around the bones has been exposed and might get confused and misunderstand the situation, go astray and transform into an evil spirit, or cause trouble. Special rules have to be followed during the transport; the driver should not greet anyone, look back or stop. Reaching the home, care will be taken to release and cleanse the vehicle that brought the bones, a procedure identical to that used when a vehicle brings a dead body from the hospital for ordinary burial. A chicken will be taken around the vehicle and given to the driver to ensure that the *tipo* is not confused, and does not follow and attack the vehicle, assuming it was the vehicle that caused the death.

Care is taken to collect all remains of the dead including fingernails and toenails and pieces of the coffin; they must be reburied with the bones in one place, to prevent the *tipo* from following a small piece of remains and to reassure the shade that the relatives want it to stay around the home. Reburials are not considered times for mourning, like normal burials, but are solemn occasions for ritual ordering and celebrations of putting things right, and, as we would like to emphasise, to create temporal order, create the new times.

Walking around the former IDP camp in Awach, we saw that the empty graves had not been refilled. People explained that a grave should be left open after exhumation so it can fill in naturally in its own time, as it is washed by rain and accumulates detritus. It was as if they did not want to hurry the ‘work of time’. There was no agreement on why a recently excavated grave should not be closed. Most said, ‘that is how we do it’. Some explained that it needed to cool, recalling the notion that shades, especially those of Jok’s children, could be hot. Perhaps its openness fits with another practice that people also shrugged off as ‘that’s just our

Figure 9.6 An exhumed grave in the former Awach IDP camp, left open to fill in slowly over time (photograph by Susan Reynolds Whyte)
tradition’. In normal burials, after the body is washed, it is dressed in clothes that are loose. Zippers, buttons and waist elastics are clipped off and left on top of the grave or thrown in the latrine. ‘If you leave the buttons it’s like putting a stone on the dead body. If you bury with the buttons, illness may strike the family and you have to dig it up and remove the buttons’, explained Santa Ajok, a local diviner. The open graves, like the open clothes, allow the tipo to be liberated from the corpse and the underground, in order to attend to the home and the family.

Family Past and Future

Reburying relatives on family land is a kind of timework that encompasses past, present and future by materialising and localising the kinship relations that make a home. By interring the remains in the soil that is claimed as ancestral, people make continuity with the past; they enhance a feeling of security in the present by diminishing worries about things left undone and dissatisfied shades; and they anticipate a future of fruitful family unity in and on the earth of a place. The reburials and the enduring graves thus constitute durations: ‘convergences of different temporalities within one rhythmic configuration’ (Nielsen 2011: 299).

Dead bodies can reconfigure space as well as time; their very corporeality means they have to be some where. Verdery (1999: 27) discusses the way reburials in ex-Yugoslavia were important means of localising claims. As in parts of East Africa, kinship was practised as rooted in particular soils (Verdery 1999: 105). Reburials were ways of assigning values to space, values that asserted kinship as a matter of earth. Graves could be claims; in a similar way, graves are used as evidence in land disputes in Uganda.

The assumption of a primordial link between kin groups and land, indeed the overriding importance of descent groups, can be questioned. Writing of another Nilotic-speaking people, the Luo of Western Kenya, Shipton (2009: 86) discusses the increasing importance of graves and their placement. He notes that Luo people did not make grave markers in the past; if anything they used mobile shrines to commemorate ancestors. Now they make monumental cement tombstones, as prosperous families in Acholiland also do. Shipton relates this ‘sacralization’ of graves to ‘the heightened importance of kinship and descent in the reckoning and defending of land claims under conditions of rural crowding and competition for land. Luo people, and especially men, have made graves into tools of territoriality, and anchors of being’ (Shipton 2009: 96).

Although land shortage is not nearly as acute in Northern Uganda as it is in Western Kenya, land conflicts are rife as people move back to their villages. We coined the term ‘patrilineal fundamentalism’ to capture the heightened use of biological descent in excluding ‘non-belongers’ even from areas where their parents or grandparents had been allowed to settle (Whyte et al. 2012). LAMARO Cecilie, one of the people we interviewed about reburials, remembered that before the war, if a family sold their land and moved elsewhere, it was up to the person
who bought their land to get the goats for reburials if they did not want other people’s graves on their new land. In other words, those who were moving did not feel it imperative to take their dead, suggesting that the material bones and graves have become more important in the period of return when questions of land and belonging are on the agenda.

Yet it would be misleading to understand the timework of reburials as merely anticipating possible future land claims. What is rooted in the land and what people spoke of again and again was home. And home is family. Reburials are explained as reuniting the family, living and the dead, in the framework of a home. Ojok, an old man, who had brought back the remains of his wife, his son’s wife, and two children, explained that when you die, it is only your body that dies; your spirit remains alive and will prefer to be where it can see its home and family every day. If you died away from home, you would not be happy until you were reunited with your family, and would keep bothering people until that happened. Rose related how she had reburied her special child, Odoch, sitting in a pot in which two holes had been pierced so his eyes faced the door of their home: ‘It is not an animal—a human being should face home.’ Many people told of how corpses are buried on their sides, propped up in the grave by stones to keep them in position, looking towards the centre of the homestead. In our imagination, an Acholi home is surrounded by watching subterranean dead.

Creating a home is a matter of entrustment, that is, of placing something in the care of someone for future return or transmission to someone else (Shipton 2007: 11). That something could be land, but it could also be bones and the associated knowledge of kinfolk. Here too there is a simultaneity of past, present and future, as Otto Samuel made clear in telling us about the pedagogy of graves, which instantiate the past for the future. ‘The graves will help me to show the children who was here before them. They should grow up and know that this is their home. The most important reason for having the family buried at home is to show the coming generations who is buried there. What is most important is the history.’ He made the same point about the grave for his father’s brother, who died of leprosy. Graves should be part of everyday life. Samuel noted that people could sit on the veranda, on the very spot where a baby had been reburied. In the same vein, a family in Southeastern Uganda argued that a woman who had left her husband long ago should yet be buried at his home. ‘We want to bury her in our courtyard, so that some day when our children are playing and climbing on her grave, we can tell them: “That is the grave of your grandmother Perusi, the one who gave birth to us”’ (Whyte and Whyte 2004: 84; see also Whyte 2005).

The past and present family that is gathered for the edification of the future members is in some ways an inclusive and unified one. As Samuel Otto’s example showed, men who had fought on opposite sides in the war are joined in family unity after death. Even his sister’s son, whose right to inherit land might have been disputed, was brought home to the family that had cared for him. The practice of

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3 However, those who can afford coffins place the dead on their backs.
reburial, the disposition of the material remains, may thus also contribute to the creation of new times by excising the divisions and separations that many families experienced during the war. The ideal of home and family unity is made material as a past, present and future, despite the recognition that it may never be achieved.

Conclusion

The disposition of corpses during and after periods of crisis is a matter of concern in many African societies. In concluding, we may consider the Northern Uganda case in relation to other examples of timework and death in periods of disruption. On the one hand, there are situations of destabilisation, displacement and chronic crisis in which the dead are desacralised, neglected by their families and ignored by the state. On the other, there are attempts to make national history by publicly celebrating and memorialising the dead for political ends.

De Boeck (1998) writes of the banalisation of death in the Democratic Republic of Congo, where ‘for an increasing number of people, death occurs outside [the social network], and has therefore lost its capacity for emplacement. In a state which is itself adrift and in which many people are on the move displaced for economic and political reasons … it has become increasingly difficult to position the dead’ (1998: 50). These neglected dead are restless and active among the living, haunting and disturbing them, and refusing to respect the divide between life and death. ‘In the end, in the postcolonial beyond … we find no pre- or postmortem any longer, no past and no future, no memory and no oblivion, no dead and no living’ (1998: 51). Bodies hastily buried by strangers far from home cannot mark time for their bereaved families and communities.

Werbner (1998) discusses the opposite case of remembrance and memorialisation of war dead by the nation-state, noting its emergence in Europe after the First World War. This has taken different turns in independent African countries. Werbner writes of Zimbabwe where the nation’s elite independence fighters are glorified in monumental graves, while common soldiers are not memorialised as individuals in any public way. By contrast, Rwanda celebrates a kind of democracy of death after the genocide, as a national project during annual days of mourning. Skulls and bones are exhibited at over 200 massacre sites throughout the country; other remains are interred in mass graves commemorating the genocide. At these sites, most remains are anonymous because it was difficult to reassemble individual bodies. But the bones and the yearly ceremonies perform timework on a national scale, drawing a terrible line between before and after and urging commitment to a future of ‘Never Again’.

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4 After the 1983–6 battles in Uganda’s Luwero region between the insurgent National Resistance Army and government forces, skulls were put on display to commemorate murders of civilians as well as deaths of fighters. But these bones were removed and buried after a few years.
The people of Northern Uganda are dealing with their war-dead in another way. There are no monuments to warriors and few for slaughtered civilians. The state is leaving the corpses and the memories to their families. And because of the protracted period of encampment, the dead include many whose demise is not directly due to the war. In this respect, the situation resembles more closely the one De Boeck describes, where people died and were buried away from home. But unlike the people of Southwestern Congo, the Acholi are trying to re-place the dead and thereby to work upon the past and the future.

The historical situation of post-conflict reburials in Northern Uganda provides a window, not only for understanding the timework carried out in this specific situation, but also for understanding how the materiality of dead bodies — in general — can be used as a technology of time manipulation that works at several different time scales simultaneously. The concreteness of the dead body offers possibilities. Manipulating it, people try not only to make pasts present, as pointed out by Verdery (1999); they also hope to create 'proper' homes and families in the present, and to work towards potential futures.

References


