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# THE LORD'S RESISTANCE ARMY AND THE ARMS THAT BROUGHT THE LORD: AMPLIFYING POLYPHONIC SILENCES IN NORTHERN UGANDA

## ABSTRACT

This article develops the notion of polyphonic silence as a means for thinking through the ethical and political ramifications of ethnographically encountering and writing about silenced violent pasts. To do so, it analyses and contrasts the silence surrounding two periods of extreme violence in northern Uganda: 1) the northern Ugandan war (1986–2006), which is contemporarily often shrouded by silence, and 2) the early decades of colonial and missionary expansion, which the Catholic Church silences in its commemoration of the death of two Acholi catechists in 1918. Employing the notion of polyphony, the article describes how neither of these silences is a mere absence of narration. Instead, polyphonic silences consist of multiple, at times discordant and contradictory sounds, and cannot be consigned to single-cause explanations such as ‘trauma’ or ‘recovery’. Reflecting on my own experience of writing about and thereby amplifying such silences, I show how writing can serve either to shield or break silence. The choice between these modes of amplification calls for reflection on the temporal distance of silence, of the relations of power amid which silence is woven, and of the researchers’ ethical commitments and normative preconceptions.

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Keywords: Acholi, Catholic mission, colonialism, silence, research ethics, trauma, Uganda

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On a small hill about a ten hours’ drive from Uganda’s capital city Kampala, heaven touches the ground. So, at least, suggests the hill’s name—*Wi-Polo*—most commonly translated as ‘in heaven’ or ‘heavens’, bestowed upon it by local Catholics in remembrance of the events that took place on its flanks a hundred years ago. Then, the touch of heaven took the form of the murder of two young catechists, Jildo Irwa

and Daudi Okello, who had travelled to these eastern parts of Acholi as carriers of the good news brought to them by the Roman Catholic Verona/Comboni missionaries<sup>1</sup>, and as vessels of the magic of writing with which that news came. A Century later, the touch of heaven takes the form of an annual mass pilgrimage to a shrine at the site of the catechists’ death, where pilgrims are addressed from a large open-air stage with

that same good news. The death of the martyrs has been commemorated with new vigour ever since they were beatified in 2002, and even more so since 2006, when travel to rural spots like Paimol became safer following the shifting of war between the Lord's Resistance Army and the government of Uganda to neighbouring countries.

It was an interest in the role of Uganda's two old missionary churches—the Catholic and the Protestant/Anglican—in the aftermath of this recent war that brought me, in 2012, to travel to *Wi-Polo* in a Comboni priest's car, together with some pilgrims and my research assistant Chiara. Along the road, we encountered pilgrims walking towards the shrine, covered in dust lifted up in the air by the passing vehicles hurrying towards the same destination. By the time Mass began, thousands had gathered under the glaring sun, many of them having walked there from distances of tens and even hundreds of kilometres. Clerically clad bishops and priests, among them elderly white Comboni missionaries, were followed by liturgical dancers: girls and women of different ages in 'customary' fabrics wrapped as skirts, and T-shirts with prints commemorating the martyrdom of Jildo and Daudi. The atmosphere was joyous: the field was filled with drumming and singing accompanied by the *adungu* (a string instrument), and ululation. The master of ceremonies welcomed 'the religious men and women from all corners of the country and the globe' to this holy ground, where he declared us to be celebrating Jildo and Daudi 'as a family'. The main celebrant then stood up to begin the mass with a prelude to the confession of sins:

In the name of the Lord Jesus, who sanctified those two young martyrs, Jildo and Daudi... Very often we are fighting against one another. We have

disagreements and fighting. This is the day to come together and pray for forgiveness and the gift of reconciliation.

The mass continued for many hours. Yet all through it, these words remained the only ones in which one might identify an allusion to violence of any kind. As I will describe, a hundred years earlier, the people of Paimol had been swept over by the brutal violence of colonial expansion into the region. And only a few years prior to the celebration I witnessed, the ravages of war had engulfed many of the Acholi pilgrims now gathered on the hill. Yet had a devotee arrived for the commemoration from far, and been unaware of all that had happened, there would have been no way to know about it, as the violence of both the distant and the recent past was wrapped in silence.

In this article, I draw from two bodies of mainly anthropological analyses of silence—one focusing on recent wars and 'trauma', the other focusing on memories of events further in the past—to look at two periods of militarised violence and social upheaval in northern Uganda<sup>2</sup>: 1) the war between the Lord's Resistance Army and the Government of Uganda and the humanitarian disaster it provoked between 1986 and 2006, and 2) the period of British conquest, missionary expansion, and quenched Acholi resistance, in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.<sup>3</sup> Despite the profound influence that the colonial-missionary takeover and the northern Ugandan war have had and continue to have in Acholi, both were, as I will show, largely silenced among the people with whom I have conducted my research.

The article's argument draws from a total of 10 months of ethnographic research (2012–2016), focusing on a Catholic and a Protestant/Anglican parish in the Eastern Acholi town of

Kitgum. Over the years, I have participated in a wide range of church activities, and had formal and informal discussions with churchgoers and clergy of different ages. Both of the silences I discuss in this article initially appeared to me as absences of narration. In the first case, silence concerned personal pasts: with extremely few exceptions, people I encountered did not speak of their experiences of the northern Ugandan war. In the second case, silence concerned the collective past of colonialism, of which very few people living in Kitgum today had personal memories. The silencing of this past was striking in contrast to how often the story of the martyrs of Paimol was referenced both by individual church members and the Catholic Church as an institution. These narratives silenced the violence of colonial-missionary expansion amid which the martyrs' death occurred.

Following the literature review, in which I develop the idea of polyphonic silence, I provide an overview of the two events, and analyse the silence surrounding them. In the final part of the article, I turn to consider the ethnographic task of writing about silence, which I suggest be thought of as an act of amplification.<sup>4</sup> The article concludes by reflecting on how temporal distance, questions of power, and research ethical commitments and normative preconceptions come to bear in choices over how silence is written about.

## ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON SILENCED PASTS

Two bodies of anthropological research can be identified that have been concerned with silenced pasts and with re-interpreting conventional interpretations of the reasons for silence. First, scholars have looked to the cultural specificity of the ways in which

memory and forgetting occur in the aftermath of large-scale historical violence, such as that of slavery and colonisation. Much of this work builds on Paul Connerton's (1989) theory of the reproduction and transmission of social memory through commemorative ceremonies and bodily practices. In Rosalind Shaw's study of memories of the slave trade in Sierra Leone (2002), she highlights the ways in which the Temne have dealt with the abysmal violence of slavery, and how memory has become inscribed, silently or in indirect inferences, in 'places, practices, images and visions, rituals and rumours' (Shaw 2002: 22). Particularly relevant for my analysis is Shaw's focus on the transformation of the Temne's visions of themselves as moral communities in the wake of the brutality meted out on them. To this end, Shaw (*ibid.*) utilises Rebecca Cole's (2001) concept of 're-membering', as used in Cole's analysis of the public silence that covered the era of colonial rule in Madagascar, particularly the vicious repression of a peasant uprising in the 1940s. As Cole (*ibid.*) shows, memories of the rebellion are absent from verbal accounts of history in the region, yet these memories are deeply present in landscape, social practice, and social structures, and are constantly engaged and contested through ritual practice.

Second, anthropological research on more recent violence—in cases where the victims, perpetrators and witnesses are largely still alive—has focused on how societal and communal recovery occurs, and how it becomes possible for people to continue living despite the ravages of violence they have experienced. As in the first group of studies concerning longer-term historical silences, much of this research has emphasised the cultural specificity of ways of over-coming violence. A particular node of thinking and practice these scholars have grappled with has been the concept of trauma.

As Fassin and Rechtman (2009) have argued, trauma has become a formative lens through which human experience is contemporarily interpreted, and the ground of understanding upon which interventions targeting post-conflict settings are largely designed. Moreover, their analysis highlights the subjectivities moulded by an epistemology of trauma: the notion of ‘trauma’ implies two categories, that of the intervening saviours, and that of the suffering, traumatised objects of intervention. What emerges from these two bodies of research is a number of partly overlapping key claims about silence concerning violent pasts.

*Silence about the past is constitutive of, and constituted by, different modes of memory.* As Shaw has noted, different ‘processes of social memory and forgetting’ (Shaw 2007: 89) lead to many ‘different kinds of silences’—an observation reiterated in Connerton’s (2008) break-down of different types of ‘forgetting’. Shaw’s (2002) work on non-verbal transmission of memory in Sierra Leone illustrates the range of silences and memories about the past in a manner that is of interest to this article’s aims as well: whereas memories of the distant past of the slave trade have become embedded in landscapes and ritual practices, memories of the recent violence of the civil war are re-worked into the religious plays of Pentecostal youth in ways that imbue these memories with new religious meaning (Shaw 2007). A key point to highlight in this regard is that the fact that the past is not spoken about does not equate an absence of memory about it: that which is silenced can be carried in individual or social memory in very distinct and clear ways, but it can just as well have retreated from conscious recollection (Cole 2001).

*Silence is not mere absence.* Scholarship on silence brings to sharp relief the problematic over-emphasis on verbalisation that plagues research in its textually bound forms. Looking

beyond the pale of words opens new angles for interpretation: not only can silence be understood as a form of communication in itself (Carbaugh, Berry, and Nurmikari-Berry 2006), but words can be understood as only one medium for the transmission of memory, among non-verbal ones such as material landscapes, objects, or scars (Jauhola 2016; Uusihakala 2008), and embodied practices ranging from simple gestures to complex rituals (Cole 2001; Connerton 1989; Shaw 2002).

*Silence and trauma can be connected—or not.* The notion of ‘trauma’ has loomed large behind popular and academic interpretations of silence: more often than not, silence covering recent violence, as well as silence regarding historic violence, has been read as a sign of individual or collective trauma, and of the repression or avoidance of painful memories (Edkins 2003; Maček 2014a; McKinney 2007). However, not all memories of a violent past are traumatic; rather, for many, memories and experiences *have been* integrated into the person’s existing inner world (Maček 2014b: 4). In such situations, rather than a powerless response to something that is too much for individuals or communities to deal with and recover from, silence can be a more or less deliberate means towards a desirable end, such as stability, moving on, harmony, healing, or peace (Eastmond and Selimovic 2012; Kidron 2009). Such alternative readings of silence may trouble what is taken for granted by scholars raised in the therapeutic era, and under the normative weight accorded in the post-Holocaust Western imagination to the act of speaking out historical wrongs.

*Silence may be necessary.* In many instances, such as politically volatile situations or the aftermath of civil war, speaking about the past can be unsafe. In such cases, silence can be both a hegemonic imposition—for instance by a ruling regime—and a survival mechanism—for

instance for that regime's subjects—as in the case of post-genocide Rwanda (Burnet 2012). An analysis of silence thereby always requires an analysis of the ways in which silence is imbricated within relations of power (Achino-Loeb 2006).

*Silence may be healing and destructive at the same time.* While silence may be repressive, violent, and harmful, it can also be desired: it may signal healing, acceptance, or moving on—and it may enable or advance these processes, for instance, as a culturally appropriate coping mechanism in communities ravaged by war (Eastmond and Selimovic 2012). Furthermore, rather than being just one or the other, silence can be both, and the meanings attached to it may be different for different members of a community, and may change drastically over time. Veena Das (2007) captures this double-sided character of silence beautifully with her concept of a descent into the ordinary: while the effects of past violence meander into the ordinary, and through the fabric of everyday social life in ways that can lead to further violence, *simultaneously*, inhabiting the life that was shattered by violence—descending into the ordinary—can be seen as a precarious step towards healing, an acknowledgement that life can and must go on despite what has happened.

The points above merge into this article's key claim, which is that *silence is polyphonic*. The notion of polyphony simultaneously highlights two interrelated aspects of silence. First: rather than a mere void or absence, silence is a form of communication, which may contain gaps and absences within its weave. Second: rather than a single sound, silence contains multiple sounds: some of them loud, some quiet, some constant, others with starts and stops. Blended together, this polyphony of sounds can create readily decipherable harmonies, or masses of complex and at times discordant tunes. Listening to

such polyphonic silence is no straightforward matter—transcribing it into sheet music even less so. The implication of such a view for the researcher is that any one 'silence' encountered in fieldwork is likely far more complex than it at first glance seems—rather than speaking simply of trauma, or repression, or healing, or forgetting, silence can simultaneously contain and communicate all of these and more. I now put these general theoretical notions to analytical work by contrasting two examples of silenced violent pasts in northern Uganda. Rather than an absence, I argue that both silences reverberate polyphonically in the present.

## WAR AND DEVASTATION IN NORTHERN UGANDA

For twenty years after Yoweri Museveni's National Resistance Army (NRA) came to power in Uganda in 1986, waves of violent conflict between the government and those opposing it wreaked destruction in northern Uganda.<sup>5</sup> The heaviest warfare concentrated on the Acholi region, where multiple rebel groups emerged, and eventually, war between Joseph Kony's Lord's Resistance Movement / Army (hereafter referred to as the rebels or the LRM/A) and Museveni's government waxed and waned for two decades. Initially, many Acholi saw Kony as fighting a legitimate battle against a violent usurper intent on destroying the Acholi and their economic base for social reproduction—their cattle. Yet as the rebels' violence became increasingly brutal and targeted at civilians, popular support for them lessened. But Museveni's government also failed the local community. Up to two million people were forcibly displaced into congested camps, where civilians were stuck between the rebels' and national army's fire, and death rates soared

due to appalling nutrition, sanitation, and health conditions. In a survey conducted around one of the worst peaks of the war, 79 percent of respondents had witnessed torture, 40 percent had witnessed killing, 5 percent had been forced to physically harm someone, and 62 percent of the women interviewed said they were considering suicide (Médecins Sans Frontières 2004a; 2004b). Emergency relief to the camps alleviated the suffering but simultaneously enabled the government's violent policy of forced displacement to continue (Alava 2008; Branch 2011; Finnström 2008).

In the early 2000s, after years of praise for Uganda for its compliance with its donors' agenda, the international community began to acknowledge the disaster unfolding in Acholi, particularly the plight of children abducted by the rebels or seeking safety in towns. The last set of peace talks failed in 2008, and by this time, the LRM/A were driven out of northern Uganda by military force (Atkinson 2010; Schomerus 2012). To this day, the conflict lingers: top LRM/A leaders are on trial at the International Criminal Court, while others continue to cause havoc in the Central African Republic (see Macdonald and Porter 2016). Moreover, the politicised ethnic tensions that fed into and were exacerbated by the war prevail in Uganda's day-to-day politics. Thousands of former rebels and abductees have returned to more or less civilian life, as they and their families struggle to find ways to co-inhabit the communities that the years of war tore apart (Amony 2015; Dunovant 2016; Porter 2016). Families, customary and religious communities, as well as governmental healthcare workers and civil society groups continue to seek means to deal with the unsettled consequences of war (Harlacher et al. 2006; Meier 2013; Victor and Porter 2017). Although the war is no longer fought in Acholi with guns and tanks, many

interpret it as being continued by other means, such as insufficient funding for healthcare and education, or through large-scale, government-sponsored land grabs (Branch 2018; Martiniello 2015).

## POLYPHONIC SILENCE OVER THE NORTHERN UGANDAN WAR

During the time of the northern Ugandan war, and for a while in its aftermath, talk of war and of what people had experienced during it filled the streets, churches, and ethnographers' recording devices. But at some point between my master's fieldwork in Kitgum in 2006, when the war was on everyone's lips, and the time I returned in 2012, people fell silent. During my longest stretch of fieldwork in 2012–2013, six years had passed since the war shifted territory to neighbouring countries, leaving people more free to breathe after almost twenty consecutive years of waxing and waning warfare. On paper, the transition from war to peace was largely complete: thousands of formerly abducted children and former LRM/A soldiers and wives had passed through integration centres, the large displacement camps had been closed, and people had moved back to their villages after years of forced displacement. Humanitarian agencies had largely been replaced by more development-oriented actors, and even these were in the process of scaling down and leaving. For most people, even in the moderate affluence of towns, life was a struggle: for livelihoods, for education, for work. Yet, during this time the overall atmosphere of the town was characterised by a profound sense of normalcy and recovery.

I could hardly recognise the Kitgum I was experiencing with my family as the same town I had visited in 2006. The town I had expected

to encounter as one painfully recovering from war felt almost untouched by it. Yet it was only gradually that it dawned on me how little the war was actually spoken of. In the first few months of fieldwork, the majority of people I talked with said nothing of the war unless I asked direct questions about it—something I intuitively chose almost never to do—and neither was it mentioned at the churches I attended. The absence of stories of war became particularly pronounced when, after some three months of fieldwork, I started conducting life story interviews with young adults at my case study parishes. More often than not, these stories were told without any reference to the war. Most of my research participants had never been abducted, or raped, or caught in the middle of gunfire. But as I came to know months later once I began asking about the silence I had encountered, they had all heard the sounds of war, lived for years in the midst of it, run for cover when sounds of shooting neared their side of the town. Almost everyone I knew had lost a family member during the war, and closely knew people who had ‘been with the rebels’. Yet more often than not, the physical and emotional wounds of war-time violence were veiled with silence.

To unpack this silence, I return to the five key points about silence that I outlined in the literature review. First, *silence about the past is constitutive of, and constituted by, different modes of memory*. As Connerton’s work (1989; 2008) details, memories are retained and transformed through commemorative ritual practices, and the silencing of particular parts of the past will over time mould the community’s memories of that past. A growing part of Ugandans, one of the youngest populations in the world, actually have very little or no personal memory of the war, or their memories of it are from a very early time in their life. If adults withhold

their stories from their children, as many have told me they choose to do, public forms of commemoration become even more central sites for the forming of collective memory. Selective silencing is practiced around commemorations: events to commemorate the victims of LRM/A massacres silence the violence committed by government forces, creating curtailed memories of the war—what Burnet (2012) refers to as hegemonic silence in post-genocide Rwanda. Yet formal commemorations are not the sole manner of ritual memorialization. The reburials of those who died during the war into their own homesteads convey memories of the circumstances in which they died, and through the correct treatment of bodies, allow for families and communities to rework relationships (see Victor and Porter 2017; Wilhelm-Solomon and Jahn 2015). In another sense, as I describe in detail elsewhere (Alava 2017b), the silencing of past violence in praise sessions at churches contributed to the creation of alternative readings of the past and the present.

Second, *silence is not mere absence*. The fact that the war is not explicitly discussed does not mean that memories of it do not exist. As I eventually learned from discussions with my friends and acquaintances, memories of the past were embedded in the landscape, and carried in bodies. A scar on the arm could act as a daily reminder of the events that led to it and of the terror that followed; a church could ignite recollection of the times it served as a place of refuge during particularly fierce battles; the pain of a permanent injury could jolt the mind back to the beating that caused it; the daily stress of unemployment serve as a nagging reminder of the opportunities lost because of the war. Memories are embodied, they linger in buildings and landmarks where violence took place, and they can be relayed between survivors without words. Burnet’s (2012) interlocutors



insisted that even when public commemorations of the Genocide suppressed their stories, their own memories of the genocide lived within them. Similarly, my friend described how it was unnecessary for her to talk about the terror she experienced as a child with her friends, since they had experienced it too; ‘a silence that rests upon the understanding that everyone knows what happened’ (Eastmond and Selimovic 2012: 512).

As I mentioned above, the occurrence of what can reasonably be considered highly traumatic events during the northern Ugandan war is staggeringly high. Yet, to infer that postwar silence is simply a consequence of trauma would be faulty, since, third, *silence and trauma can be connected—or not*. This argument is best conveyed through Das’ notion of a descent into the ordinary (2007). As past violence is incorporated into the ordinary, it may continue to lead the victims—both individually and communally—to turn the violence in on themselves. The process is often described as a destruction of the social fabric (e.g. Burnet 2012), a metaphor evoked also in Acholi. One of my Protestant friends elaborated this point when commenting on the silence I shared having experienced in my first six months of fieldwork:

And now you see that there’s a lot of trauma. You see that? That is it. They don’t want to talk about it, but it is affecting them... That is why there’s a lot of violence. There’s too much violence here. Wives killing the husbands, husbands killing wives, children. So, that is the result of it. Eh? Because talking, choosing not to talk about it, does not mean that you don’t know and it’s not affecting you. But and because you even don’t talk about it, you want to put yours in action. Anyone who triggers it, it comes

all and [snaps her fingers]. Lot of trauma. (Interview, 2013).

Her description evokes a sense of trauma that permeates the weave of the ordinary, and of memories that may be triggered and spill out uncontrollably; what Meinert and Whyte, writing of Acholi, describe as ‘contamination that seeps into [the affected person’s] immediate environment—his family and home’ (Meinert and Whyte 2017: 284). But a descent into the ordinary, in the sense invoked by Das (2007), also refers to an acknowledgement of what has happened, and of continuing life even after it has been shattered. Not all memories of the past, even violent and terrible ones, are traumatic. For many, memories and experiences *have been* integrated into the person’s existing inner world (Maček 2014b: 4), in which case not talking about the past does not necessarily imply negative avoidance but, rather, a precarious movement towards healing.

My friend’s words, quoted above, also refer to another aspect of silence, namely, fourth, that *silence may be necessary*. In Kitgum, this was true in two ways. On the one hand, silence was perceived as a necessary means of protecting relationships within communities. Shaw (2007) describes how in Sierra Leone, speaking of past violence was considered risky since it might trigger renewed violence—a risk my friend attributed particularly to those who had committed violence during the war. But beyond this, I believe silence was a communal ‘strategy for coexistence’ (Eastmond and Selimovic 2012: 524). In Kitgum, I came with time to understand that my research participants shared pews at church with their former violators; had to live with the knowledge that their business partners’ success was enabled by access to military supplies during the war; that the people who had grossly abused them had gained

positions of practical immunity through their ties with the political elite; or that while they had enjoyed the comfort of a private school in Kampala enabled by the pooling of a families' resources, close relatives had been stranded in displacement camps. The extent to which suffering and success and blame and forgiveness had become intertwined and woven into the fabric of families and communities in the course of two decades of war was so profound that to just stay quiet about it all was far easier than risking the mess that it might cause to dig it up.

On the other hand, silence served to protect a fragile relationship between the Acholi region and the Ugandan government. While individual LRM/A massacres have been commemorated, and the president has acknowledged individual cases of what he has termed 'rogue' soldiers' attacks against civilians in the region (see Alava 2017b, Chapter 6), innumerable cases of violence, by the national army and by state-sponsored local defense groups, remain silenced (see particularly Dolan 2009; Finnström 2009; and Porter 2016). Moreover, the governments' overall complicity in the war, and its perpetuation of the regional divisions beneath it, are largely pushed off the public agenda. Even among the Acholi, not everyone desires such reckoning to take place, as the population is divided between those who continue to oppose Museveni, and those who have either always supported him, or have at some point switched allegiances. For many in the region, a fear of the individual or collective retaliation that can follow if one stands for the opposition is sufficient reason to maintain silence about the government's wrong-doings during the war, and even to support the ruling regime.

In the last two elections, those who have chosen to vote for Museveni's NRM have made

up the majority. As my research participants argued, supporting the regime is the only way in which Acholi region could hope to gain medicine for government hospitals or tarmacked roads—the latter of which was completed through the region, with Chinese funding, right after the 2016 elections. But the tensions belying this support are volatile, as is repeatedly shown by the violence between opposition and government supporters during elections and by-elections in different parts of the country (see Alava and Ssentongo 2016; Titeca and Onyango 2012; Vokes and Wilkins 2016).

This brings us to the final point: *silence may be healing and destructive at the same time*. Burnet (2012) has argued that in post-genocide Rwanda, silence is simultaneously a culturally appropriate, voluntarily adopted coping mechanism, and hegemonically enforced. In this vein, I argue that the silencing of the northern Ugandan war, or of its controversial aspects, can be understood as a coping mechanism, yet this should also be queried and probed. The careful monitoring of what can and cannot be spoken of enables co-existence, yet simultaneously serves to stunt much-needed societal and political critique, just as the suppression of violent memories can enable moving on, yet simultaneously hinder processes of social and individual healing.

In sum: silence regarding the northern Ugandan war is deeply complex—it is a silence that contains multiple sounds. It speaks simultaneously of healing, of trauma, of hurt, of hope, of fear, of moving on. Rather than an absence of sound, silence thus appears polyphonic. Silence, as disparate, at times contradictory sounds interspersed with breaks and gaps, calls for the ethnographer to pay careful attention to the complexity and multiplicity of the meanings it holds.

## COLONIAL WAR AND MISSIONARY EXPANSION IN ACHOLI

The years of the northern Ugandan war were not the first time that violence had swept through Acholi. In the following, I analyse the way in which the context of violence of colonial and missionary expansion is silenced in contemporary narratives about the Catholic Acholi martyrs, whose commemoration opened this article.

Attempts to establish British colonial dominion in the Acholi region culminated in 1909 with the quenching of opposition led by the area's most powerful chief, *Rwot* Awich, to establish Gulu town on his clan's land.<sup>6</sup> All over Acholi, customarily anointed hereditary chiefs, *rwodi moo*, were disposed of and replaced with new colonially-appointed *rwodi kalam*, 'chiefs of the pen'.<sup>7</sup> To curb opposition to these changes, the British decided, with the backing of British Church Missionary Society and the Italian Verona missionaries, to confiscate Acholi weapons. In 1911, the Lamogi clan announced that they would neither surrender their arms nor bow to colonial rule, and stocked up a network of caves under the Guruguru hills in preparation for war. The British captain responsible for the siege of the hills that eventually followed noted down the complaints shouted out by the fighters: 'Our fathers carried your loads! We will never work for any *Mzungu* (white man)! We will fight till we kill one *Mzungu*! We don't want peace!' (cited in Cisternino 2004: 375). In response, colonialist forces cut off supply lines and access to clean water of those in Guruguru. Ninety-one Acholi warriors were killed, three hundred men, women, and children died of dysentery, and over a thousand Acholi were taken prisoner (Adimola 1954: 175). According to missionary and colonial sources studied by

a Comboni missionary priest and historian, thirty-four Acholi traditional chiefs were permanently deported to Central Uganda after the rebellion was quenched, and new chiefs were named in their place (Cisternino 2004: 375).

This is the context of colonial violence and social upheaval in which the two catechists, Jildo and Daudi, enter the scene. Their death—six years after and 180 kilometers to the east of the site of the Lamogi rebellion—occurred amid widespread turmoil in Eastern Acholi. People in the area had been harshly hit by an epidemic of smallpox in 1917 and a serious drought-induced famine in 1918, and were demanding an end to the enforced labour and taxation imposed on top of their other sufferings by the British district governor. Anger came to a head when the governor deposed the anointed *rwot moo*, Lakidi and his sub-chief, Ogwal. They were replaced with a new chief from a neighbouring region—one who had gone to a Protestant boarding school and become amenable to the policies of the colonial government. (Cisternino 2004: 475–490).

On the 18<sup>th</sup> of October 1918, revolt broke out. Children of the deposed sub-chief, Ogwal, attacked the compound in which Jildo and Daudi were staying and speared the catechists to death. A parallel attack on the newly-imposed *rwot kalam* failed, but in nearby villages, numerous foreigners were killed, as well as local Catholic converts. Eventually, the rebellion was quelled when *Rwot* Lakidi and his sub-chief were taken to prison in Kitgum. One of the rebels was publically hanged on Christmas Eve while the rebellion still continued, and once others were caught two more were hanged, 'with (...) solemn ceremonial, after receiving Baptism from Fr. Cesar' at Kitgum Mission (Cisternino 2004: 487). According to a letter written by a Verona father, Chief Lakidi, who had been deposed by the colonial government and later

appeared as the leader of what were called the ‘Paimol rebels’, had told the priest prior to his execution:

I was only against the Miri [government] that had unjustly dethroned me, and with one pretext or another stripped me of my livestock and kept me for months imprisoned in Kitgum. I had promised to send my son to the Catholic Mission, and if he did not come it was because the karani [clerk] had told me that the Miri wanted the Chiefs’ children to be sent to the Protestants and not to you. (Letter published in the Verona missionaries’ magazine *La Nigrizia* in May 1919, quoted in Cisternino 2004: 487)

Missionary sources reproduced by Cisternino suggest that the small cluster of local Catholics in Paimol had from the very first seen Daudi and Okello as having ‘died for the cause of Religion’ (Cisternino 2004: 490; Gulu Archdiocese 2012). Yet it was only in the 1990s that steps were taken to call for their beatification, which eventually took place in 2002—a point I return to in discussing the polyphonic silence resounding in this events’ commemoration. The point to make here is that although the correspondence between Verona priests immediately after Jildo and Daudi’s death, as well as official documents gathered in support of the beatification, take careful stock of the political and socioeconomic context of the Paimol rebellion, the public narrative that is contemporarily produced of the martyrs is almost completely taken out of this broader historical and political context. The violence is silenced. In the following I ask: why?

## POLYPHONIC SILENCE OVER THE MISSIONARY-COLONIAL PAST

I propose to answer the question utilising the same five points concerning silence—albeit in different order—as in the preceding analysis about the northern Ugandan war. First, I claim the silence that covers essential aspects of the Acholi Catholic martyr’s story *is not mere absence*: it is a polyphonic silence filled with significance. In order to unpack my argument, I must delve into describing exactly how the martyrs are portrayed. For the contemporary Catholic church in Acholi, the martyrs are, in the words of my friend Father Joseph Okumu, who gathered the archival materials and witness statements required for the beatification, ‘models of freedom, apostolic zeal, truth, justice, responsibility, forgiveness, and reconciliation’ (Gulu Archdiocese 2012). In the official Catholic account, exemplified for instance in a small hand-out about the martyrs that I was given at the commemoration of their beatification in 2012, Jildo and Daudi’s death is described in the following manner:

People who opposed the new religion took advantage of socio-political unrest to stop the preaching of the Gospel in Paimol. The two catechists were hounded, threatened, ordered to give up their activities, and finally speared to death. (Gulu Archdiocese 2002)

In this telling, the socio-political unrest acted as a veil beneath which opposition to the new religion could take place. In my view, a more truthful telling would show the new religion as a vital factor in that socio-political unrest. Could it be that this bigger picture is silenced, because the *silence may be necessary*—and if so, necessary

for who? Because the events were significantly further removed in time than was the northern Ugandan war, I would argue there was less need for silence as an individual or communal coping mechanism.<sup>8</sup> Instead, I believe the silence has been useful for the Catholic Church as an institution: silence, after all, is always imbricated in relations of power (Achino-Loeb 2006).

In an analysis of texts written by Verona missionaries, Todd Whitmore (2013) argues that by silencing critical voices from within their midst, the missionaries lent their pen to justifying colonialism, thus protecting their own position—as geopolitically suspicious Italians—within the British colonial order. Whitmore points in particular to the *Acoli Macon* (Pellegrini 2006 [1949]); the standardised account of Acholi history, in which the dawn of colonialism in Acholi is narrated as the liberation of the Acholi people from Sudanese slavers by the benevolent British. I argue that a similar occlusion of facts takes place in accounts of the Paimol martyrs.

The silencing performed by the Vatican is even more stark than it is in the accounts that I heard and read in Uganda. The formal Vatican announcement of the martyrs' beatification describes how Daudi Okello was cautioned by a Verona priest about the difficulties he was to face in Paimol, such as 'frequent in-fights of the local people, instigated also by gangs of raiders and traders of slaves and gold, sporadically visiting the area'. The Vatican directory does acknowledge that there were some 'tribal and political disputes' since 'submission to the British government was often followed by ill-concealed intolerance'. But the specific dynamics of this submission and intolerance are obfuscated, and a vague reference to (non-British) raiders and traders is left to fill the void. In this vein, the disposal of the anointed chief Awich and his replacement with a 'chief of the pen', and the

outrage this triggered, are described and diluted into the following statement:

[D]ue to an unhappy decision taken by the District Commissioner, there rose a serious tension. Raiders, Muslim elements, and witchdoctors took advantage of the violent situation to get rid of the new religion brought by Daudi. (The Holy See 2002)

In essence, the Vatican account dismisses the entire project of colonisation, in all its gruesome dehumanising violence, as nothing but one individual 'unhappy decision' by one colonial officer. The deposed local chief's sons, who actually speared the catechists, are described as 'raiders, Muslim elements, and witchdoctors (ibid.)'. In this version of what led up to Daudi and Jildo's martyrdom, there is no upheaval of a cosmological balance, no hut tax, no forced labour, no loss of customary authorities—not to mention any culpability of the church as the handmaid of colonisation.

To think of how this alternative narrative of the past is produced, it is helpful to consider the claim that *silence about the past is constitutive of, and constituted by, different modes of memory*. The commemoration of the martyrs, and the pilgrimage and the open-air church service in which it culminates, has become the largest single yearly gathering in northern Uganda. As Connerton shows, ceremonial commemoration holds the power to carry and mould a society's shared memories. That moulding, moreover, can be deliberately guided through choices of emphasis and erasure, which become naturalized through repetition. The silence that the Church, as an institution, produced at Wi-Polo, was also echoed by its members. None of the Catholics I spent time with, most of them committed members of their churches, ever spoke of the violence of their churches' past. Many priests

in the region, both missionary and Acholi ones, are keen to engage in ‘inculturating’ Catholic practice to resonate more with Acholi custom, and express highly (self-) critical views on their church. But despite the fact that all Ugandans have read the postcolonial critique of missionary work that permeates the Acholi author and anthropologist Okot p’Bitek’s (p’Bitek 1971, 1972) razor-sharp analysis and prose, lay Catholic Christians, with the exception of former seminarians, have never expressed similar sentiments to me. Even when priests or church institutions were subjected to critique for what were perceived as their personal or institutional failures, the churches as such were taken as given, and their existence was never questioned.

While the story of Jildo and Daudi could be interpreted and utilised to advance a postcolonial critique of the violent roots of colonialism in the region, and the ways in which missionary work served the violence of Empire, it is not. Rather, the martyrs have been transformed, through rhetoric and repetition, into a symbol that simply answers questions that are of immediate relevance to Christians and the Acholi Catholic Church today. This came out eloquently in the sermon given by the Italian Comboni bishop of the neighbouring Karamoja diocese at the commemoration of the martyrs in 2012. The bishop first re-told the official story of the martyrs, after which he analysed it in light of the Bible readings of the day. He noted that just as the martyrs had come to this remote spot, the pilgrims had come to find meaning, and a sense of worthiness:

Here we are among simple people. Here where we look at the beauty of the mountains, we see something beautiful... Tomorrow we will again be confronted by the crisis of faith. The crisis of family, the crisis of politics. There is crisis everywhere!

There is confusion, corruption, drugs. People have lost the meaning of existence. This is crisis! They are looking, but they don’t know for what... Here, (...) these two young men, Jildo and Daudi, lost their lives for the Gospel. We need their courage, we need their faith. (Fieldwork notes, 20 October 2012)

The priest ended his sermon by calling young people to service—as catechists, as priests, as nuns, as lay brothers, as dedicated Christians, and as the future dedicated heads of Christian families.

In this commemorative ceremony, to use Connerton’s terms, the ‘community is reminded of its identity as represented by and told in a master narrative’ (1989: 65). Yet memory is not only transmitted through narrative, for as Connerton shows, the body serves as its key location. To me, the bodies gathered at Wi-Polo, and the postures they adopt, tell two parallel stories. Of particular relevance here are those functions of the body that have become automatic: postures and gestures, which as Connerton argues, unconsciously convey memories and knowledge of social hierarchy. From such a perspective, one could claim that the silence with which the Acholi pilgrims listened to the priests’ sermon at Wi-Polo, or the manner in which they bowed their head as they came to receive Holy Communion, carried in it the memory of how their forefathers were made to bow under the military power of their colonial lords and the softer power of Christian mission. In such a light, participation in the commemoration would convey a deeply traumatic embodied memory. But to leave it at this would not suffice. Echoing the claim that *silence and trauma can be connected—or not*, I claim there is another side to the silent gaps in the martyrs’ story.

This becomes apparent upon turning attention again to the crowd gathered in Wi-Polo for the martyrs' commemoration. To me, the joyful ululating of the many-thousand-headed crowd, the radiant smiles on the faces of the liturgical dancers, and the Small Christian Communities and parish delegations lining up to bring gifts of offertory, all spoke of a claim of ownership: the pilgrims sang praise and gave offerings to their martyrs, their God, and their Church. From such a view, the motivation for the Church to mould the martyrs' story into the form it takes today also appears in a new light. While the Acholi martyrs' commemoration, and the grounds upon which they were beatified in 2002, follow strictly regulated Catholic prescripts, I find it significant that the catechists' beatification, which had lain dormant for decades, was re-initiated by Acholi clerics in the midst of the war.<sup>9</sup> The story of the Acholi martyrs focuses solely on the martyrs; it skirts past the fact that their killers, too, were Acholi. In this manner, the Acholi are portrayed neither as former rebels nor as traumatised victims, as the narratives of the government or NGOs would often have it in the region, but as something else: committed servants of the Church and of the community. By taking the martyrs' death out of the political and social context in which it occurred, the Catholic Church in Acholi has snubbed the critical analytical threads that might follow were the story to be remembered in a broader form than it is today. Yet by so doing, and by focusing on themes of perseverance, unity, meaning and peace, the Church has enabled a moral re-imagining of community (Shaw 2002; 2007)—a re-membering made possible by the re-signification of a painful past (Cole 2001).

This brings me to the last point: that *silence may be healing and destructive at the same time*. Echoing earlier scholarship on the Acholi region

(Atkinson 2010; Finnström 2008; Whitmore 2013), I have argued that the northern Ugandan war in all its terror was an outgrowth of a *longue durée* legacy of militarized violence and social destruction in the region. The many-layered violence committed during the period of colonial and missionary expansion reverberates till this day, and I believe it also reverberates at Wi-Polo. In my view, the Catholic Church has failed to lay bare and lament its complicity in that violence. In failing to do so, it also fails to live up to the ideals of peace, non-violence, and reconciliation that it has vocally proclaimed during and after the northern Ugandan war. As Uusihakala shows in this issue, public gestures such as apologies offer no simple shortcuts to repairing historical wrongs. Yet it appears to me that Catholic ritual expressions of lament and grief, which have been employed to address the northern Ugandan war, could similarly be drawn upon to engage the earlier violence of colonial and missionary expansion. Perhaps for the Church to do so as an institution could also contribute to the processes of social healing that I witnessed Acholi Catholics striving for in their daily lives.

To conclude, I argue that as was the case regarding silence around the northern Ugandan war, so also the silence regarding the era of missionary-colonial expansion is polyphonic, containing multiple sounds. The silence surrounding the martyrs' story speaks simultaneously of the deep collective trauma of colonisation, and of the desire of Acholi Catholics to re-member (Cole 2001; Shaw 2002) themselves as a community in its aftermath. It speaks of the desire of its members to move forward, and of the institutional Catholic Church's inability or unwillingness to reckon with its violent past. Yet it also speaks of the passing of time, and of the power of particular interpretations to be foregrounded at

the cost of others. With time, unless alternative narratives are given space, fewer and fewer pilgrims to Paimol will even have heard of the political violence that surrounded their martyrs' demise. In the above analysis, I have suggested conceptualising such silences as polyphonic. What remains to be discussed is my argument that writing about silence inevitably amplifies it.

## AMPLIFYING SILENCE THROUGH WRITING

In my doctoral dissertation (Alava 2017b), I amplified both of the silences I discuss in this article, but in different ways: I drew attention to the silence my research participants held concerning the northern Ugandan war in order to shield it, whereas I amplified the Catholic Church's silence about colonialism so as to explicitly break it. In the remainder of this article, I focus on how those silences that are first encountered in fieldwork are turned into and engaged in ethnographic writing. Writing about silence, I will argue, requires paying attention to the complex relationships within which research data is produced, and reflection on the 'personal and professional vision[s] of what should be remembered and articulated, as well as how, where, and by whom' (Kidron 2009: 24), that guide researchers' interpretations of and responses to silence.

Following literally years of thinking about the right way to treat the silence my informants indicated they wanted to hold, I attempted to develop a manner of writing that reflected that silence, and what I, employing the Acholi term *anyobanyoba* (literally 'mingling', translated to English as 'confusion'), described as the confusion of life in the aftermath of war (Alava 2017b). Most importantly, instead of a sterile overview of the war, I wrote in my dissertation about Kitgum as a town emerging from war.

I showed the silent ways in which the war continued to be present, but emphasised the ways in which people were moving ahead. To justify these choices, I drew on Michael Taussig, who, describing the impossibility of capturing experience in words, has written:

It is as if writing—the epitome of consciousness—obliterates reality, pushing it further and further out of reach (...) How tragic, then, that each word you write down changes from a flower into a toad. Each word seems to multiply the distance between you and what the word was supposed to be about. (Taussig 2011: 19)

In this passage, Taussig recounts a story he heard from an unnamed anthropologist. The anthropologist had asked his informants to tell him about atrocities they had experienced during the rubber boom in Colombia. One of the informants had declared that only sorcerers wanted to know about such things, and that they used such stories for evil.

True, false, or in between, this story has weighed on me to the present, for it suggests that as regards atrocity there is wisdom in muteness and that to bear witness to atrocity requires particular measures and conditions that could indeed be regarded as magical. (Taussig 2011: 135)

As an author, I felt I could not muster the magic it would take to bear witness to the atrocity of the war. I thus argued, echoing Taussig, that there was 'wisdom in muteness'. Since many of my research participants did not speak about the war at all, or spoke of it only haltingly, I chose in my writing to amplify their silence, and to shield it.



In contrast, my response to the silence covering the violence of the colonial past was strikingly different. As I have argued above, public accounts of the one event of the early colonial era that is commemorated today—the killing of two Catholic catechists in Paimol—silence crucial aspects of the catechists' story. Namely, how their life and death was connected to the violence of colonial conquest, and to contestation between those Acholi who supported the colonial government and those who opposed it. In my own writing I chose to break this silence, and to ground my analysis of the Catholic Church's contemporary public role within a deliberate critical exposition of its culpability in brutal historical violence—similarly to what I do above.

At the time of writing, I was not consciously aware of the different tones I adopted vis-à-vis the two silences, in fact, it was only upon beginning to work on this article that I became aware of the very different choices I had made. Yet in hindsight, I believe the choices I made intuitively actually followed similar principles. To sketch these out, and to outline what I believe is the value of the notion of polyphony for ethnographers tasked with writing about silence, I suggest differentiating between interpretation and writing. *Interpreting* silence as polyphonic requires an unpacking of the cultural, political, and social processes that have shaped it and through which it is sustained, and acknowledgement of the complexity of different actors and their different purposes for contributing to silence. *Writing* about polyphonic silence in a conscious and deliberate manner, on the other hand, requires an unpacking of the ethical commitments and the normative pre-theoretical understandings with which the researcher comes within hearing range of it.

In the case of the two silences I have described, I responded in what I believe to have been justifiably different manners for two core reasons. First, because of the different locations held by my research participants and the institutions I studied in the relations of power that in part constituted the silences. Second, because of the differences in temporal distance between my fieldwork and the two silenced violent pasts, one being intimately near in time, the other further away in the past. My choices about how I wrote were undergirded in my research ethical commitments: to protect my individual informants from harm while submitting the institutions I studied to grounded social critique.

## CONCLUSION

Every November, a growing crowd of pilgrims gathers on the low hill of Wi-Polo in one of the furthest corners of eastern Acholi. Whether they come to enjoy the festivities as a form of entertainment, or to pray to the martyrs for strength in their everyday lives, they do so in a way that foregrounds the celebration of courage and faith amid pain—not the pain itself. In Acholi, the pains of the past are silenced, collectively and individually: by almost all of the Catholics I have met in Kitgum over the years, just as they were at the martyrs' commemoration I attended in Wi-Polo.

An ethnographers' commitment to truth-telling, the healing power of speech, or post-colonial justice of some sort, might lead one to argue that Wi-Polo is full of repressed traumas, hidden scars, and the sketchily covered wounds of war. On the other hand, a glorification of 'local' cultural means of surviving violence might lead the ethnographer to naively interpret the site as a symbol for moving on, recovery, healing,

or agency (see Jungar and Oinas 2011). To push beyond a dichotomy of suffering and agency, I suggest seeing silence as not just a single sound or its absence. Rather, silence is akin to polyphonic music. In Wi-Polo as elsewhere, it tells multiple simultaneous and discordant stories, of repression alongside choice, and of healing alongside trauma.

In this article, I have illustrated the two key issues to be considered when choosing whether and how to amplify silence: temporal distance and power. The choice to amplify and break a proximate and intimate silence which individuals and communities shield for their own purposes is different to the choice to do so regarding events long-gone. Likewise, the choice to probe and break a silence that is upheld primarily by an institution is different to breaking a silence upheld by an individual or group occupying a vulnerable social position: the first primarily serving that institution's interests, the latter being a means of self-preservation. But real life situations are rarely that straightforward, since multiple interests may conflict and converge in complex ways in the creation and perpetuation of silence. Particularly when silence is shared by institutions and individuals alike, or when silenced traces of past events continue to undergird contemporary social inequalities, the dilemmas of the ethnographer—whether and how to write about silence—can be hard to untangle.

While the claim that interpretation is relative to personal and disciplinary positionalities and preconceptions can be seen as a truism of early 21<sup>st</sup> Century social science, it seems to me there is something particular about interpreting silence, which accentuates the methodological and ethical dilemmas involved. This particularity is, I believe, related to our profound reliance on words. When they are absent, the violence inherent to all research

practice is laid bare: the violence of conjuring words with which to write about the experience of our research participants for the consumption of our often exclusively academic audiences. Not only is there something magical about witnessing atrocity, as Taussig (2011) claimed, but, I would argue, in witnessing the lives of others with words in the first place. Sometimes that magic fails, and there is, as Taussig suggests, wisdom in muteness. It is my hope that the idea of polyphony can offer ways for thinking through the ethical and political ramifications of encountering and amplifying silence through ethnographic research and writing—of choosing when to speak out and how, and when, instead, to join the silence.

## NOTES

- 1 In the 1970's, the Verona Mission adopted the name of its Italian founder Daniel Comboni, and since then the missionaries have been referred to as Combonis. The Mission was initially driven by Comboni's vision to spread Christianity southwards following the Nile, and to convert Africa through African staff.
- 2 In this article 'northern Uganda' is used interchangeably with 'Acholi' to denote the area formally known as the Acholi sub-region. There are 1.47 million ethnic Acholi in Uganda, amounting to 4.4 percent of the total population (UBOS 2016).
- 3 Many other periods in Acholi history have also been marked by violence. In the late 1800s, raiding by and collaboration with Sudanese slavers' entrenched divisions among Acholi chiefdoms and clans, leading to tensions, which, exacerbated by the flow of small arms to the region, broke out in violent ways (Atkinson 2010: 267–72; Dwyer 1972: 39–57; Girling 1960: 129–33). Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and well into the time of the LRM/A war, fierce cattle raids by neighbouring pastoralist groups also wrecked havoc. The Acholi were also among the groups worst hit by the terror of Idi Amin's regime. Yet I argue that the two periods I focus on stand out. The time of colonial violence and missionary

expansion initiated unforeseen transformations in religious, political, and cultural formations in this region. Likewise, the two decades of war that followed the incumbent president Museveni's forceful ascension to power in 1986, and the coerced internal displacement that ensued, cataclysmically upset the social and cosmological harmony that, as Porter (2016) shows, holds pride of place for many Acholi.

- 4 I use the concept of 'amplification' to relate to the act of 'expand[ing] something by the use of detail or illustration or by closer analysis'—not to the act of increasing something, as in those analyses that refer to 'amplifying silence' when analysing mechanisms through which silence is perpetuated and expanded within authoritarian regimes (Stern and Hassid 2012).
- 5 The most important accounts of the history of war in the region can be found in Atkinson (2010), Behrend (1999), Branch (2003, 2011), Finnström (2008) and Otunnu (2002).
- 6 The Catholic missionary Crazzolaro described the establishment of Gulu thus: 'On hearing the news, the population is thoroughly shaken. They still have their grains in the fields, but orders are that they must pick up cereals not for themselves but for Gulu town... The government has ordered to burn down any house or village of those who have made remonstrations... I have seen burnt barns everywhere.' (Crazzolaro's diary, quoted in Cisternino 2004: 361).
- 7 *Rwot* is singular for chief, *rwodi* plural.
- 8 Yet it must be noted that the events of the early 20th Century continue to structure social life—and social inequalities—in remarkably persistent ways (see Cole 2001: 168). As I show with Catrine Shroff in detail elsewhere, tensions between churches and their members, and between the descendants of early Christian converts and their neighbours, are contemporarily playing out in disputes over land (Alava and Shroff 2019).
- 9 The first steps to canonise Jildo and Daudi were taken by Verona missionary priests already in the 1940's, but the process was shelved in 1953 amidst the missionaries' uncertain standing in the run-up to Uganda's independence. It was only in 1996 that a synod meeting reopened the issue and began gathering the proof required for the martyr's beatification (Wipolo Martyrs Shrine 2019). The next 'step' in the story of the martyrs would be for the Church to find proof of miracles, whereafter the martyrs could be canonised—that is, pronounced saints.

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