

## **Haunted by the Past**

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Tribal chiefs bury remains of war victims to quell ghostly fears.

Puffing away at her pipe, 68-year-old Martina Ajok says she is no longer worried about being haunted by ghosts and spirits from the region's two decades of war.

"Now that the rituals have been conducted, we can all live peacefully," said Ajok, a resident of the Gira-Gira internal refugee camp. "My boys are able to go out in the woods and hunt, while my daughters go to fetch firewood."

"Previously, no one would dare step ... into the bush," she explained. "The bones [of war dead] are scattered everywhere."

Most were victims of the Lord's Resistance Army, LRA, which fought government forces in northern Uganda from 1986 to 2006. The insurgency left an estimated 100,000 dead, mostly from war-related causes, and displaced nearly two million.

The war virtually ended when LRA leader Joseph Kony retreated to northeastern Democratic Republic of Congo, DRC, in 2006, giving people in northern Uganda the chance to start rebuilding their lives.

But as they began to do so, they have encountered a new problem - many in the north are convinced the land is haunted by the spirits of those who met violent deaths at the hands of the LRA.

It is a deeply rooted idea that grows out of traditional religious practices which includes a belief in spirits and their ability to affect daily life, usually in bad ways.

Tribal and cultural leaders are trying to address this problem by conducting traditional burial ceremonies to dispel the fears.

Sophie Agwoko, an Acholi community worker, said a wave of complaints prompted tribal elders to initiate the burial ceremonies for the remains of war victims.

The burials purge villages of the spirits that their residents fear, she said.

"We got a lot of complaints from the people, many saying they could not return to their villages unless the areas were cleansed," she explained.

This left tribal leaders with little choice but to act, having urged everyone to vacate the nearly 200 former refugee camps across the north.

The Acholi tribe, which dominates northern Uganda, has budgeted about 35,000 US dollars to conduct ceremonies through March, Agwoko said.

“There is that fear of facing vengeful spirits,” Agwoko continued. “Some people are developing mental illness and psychological trauma and [some] deaths are also occurring [that people attribute to attacks by bad spirits].”

John Otika claimed that he and his 30-year-old son, Charles Okwera, encountered a strange, human-like creature that stared at them for a few minutes, before disappearing.

“We were walking back home [one evening],” Otika told IWPR, “when the creature appeared. It was tall and carrying a lot of things, but it remained quiet.”

The encounter, he said, affected them both.

“Although I recovered from the illness I developed after the incident, my son is still mentally unstable,” Otika said.

Burying the bones must be done according to tradition, community representatives said, otherwise more problems can arise.

Loka Tokwiny, a representative of the Acholi tribe’s Lamogi clan, warned that the spirits can attack those who find the remains, unless they are accorded a decent burial.

Done properly, Tokwiny said, the bones are wrapped in a clean white sheet and lowered into a grave. Traditional rituals must be conducted by elders and include the sacrifice of a cock, goat and sheep.

The sacrifices, he said, purge the spirits of the dead.

Some doctors have suggested that locals’ belief that somehow their land is haunted by the ghosts of LRA victims is linked to post-traumatic stress disorder.

Indeed, a 2007 study conducted by Gulu University, Moi University in Kenya and the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine found that people forced into camps during the war had been clearly traumatised by their experiences.

The study examined the health of 1,210 former internal refugees selected from camps in the Gulu and Amuru districts.

Edbert Sondrop, senior lecturer at the London School, said, “People should realise that these problems that people have gone through over the years are now being reflected in the very high levels of trauma and depression, which means people will have difficulty in [rebuilding] their lives.”

“It’s not just a matter of saying OK, we take them back to their land, get them some seeds and some tools. Some people will be in need of specific extra assistance.”

Joe Wacha is an IWPR-trained reporter.

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