Introduction

One February night in 1970, a young man named Mariko called at our house in eastern Uganda. He looked frightened and asked us to hurry home with him – his mother was badly off and needed to be taken to the health centre at Butaleja. Since we had one of the two cars in that part of Bunyole County, we were used to being called out at all hours for such emergencies. But when we entered the house of Mariko's parents, we saw immediately that this was not the type of case that usually went to the health centre.

Namugwere, Mariko's mother, lay on a mattress on the floor moaning, shouting out, and trembling while her husband, Anatolius, supported her from behind. By the light of two small oil lamps, we could see the concern on the faces of her grown children. The illness had come on suddenly, they said. In the morning, when she had gone to weed millet with her husband, she felt poorly. Her heart pained her, and the smell of the gourd of banana beer her husband brought along made her feel sick. Later, in the evening after dinner, the pain increased and spread to every part of her body – her head, neck, mouth, stomach, and arms.

By the time we arrived, she was doing what Nyole call *ohusamira*: shaking, groaning, and speaking strangely. Her husband asked, as one is supposed to ask a person who behaves in this way, *Ndiiwe ani?* – 'Who are you?' 'I am Hititira,' she exclaimed, 'I want a goat. I am Walumbo, I want a cock. Again, I am Lubuya, I want a cock.' Sitting up on her mattress, she moved her shoulders as if dancing, and she kicked and flung out her arms. She called for water, and was given some in which herbal medicine had been mixed.

Returning to herself, she began to cry, 'My children, I'm dying.' She called to one of her sons: 'Siliva, don't I have your money? I'm dying – it's in my sash there at the foot of the bed – go get it.' And to her married daughter, she said likewise: 'Maria, I have five shillings of yours – go take it – as for me, my life is slipping away; I don't know if I'll recover.'

Another fit of trembling followed in which Namugwere again asserted that she was three spirits – Hititira, Lubuya and Walumbo. This time her

husband objected. The named spirits were *ekuni*–spirits associated with clans–and he could not see what business they had appearing so. 'I've already given Lubuya three goats–I bought them in Bugwere. As for Walumbo, I take chickens every year. Hititira doesn't yet have a medium who would be offering fowls.' He turned to his son Mariko: 'I know what this sickness is; this is fever–arising in the intestines and coming onto the heart. It makes her talk like a mad woman.'

Namugwere continued to shake and moan. 'What do you say? I am Hititira, Lubuya, Walumbo. I want a goat and cocks.' Finally her husband resigned himself, took two cocks and went out into the courtyard. Approaching the small shrine house, holding the birds, he spoke: 'If it is you Hititira, Lubuya and Walumbo, wanting to eat, I give you two huge cocks–here they are. I want you to leave my wife–let her recover.' When he entered the house again, his wife nodded gratefully: 'I'm glad, I'm glad.'

Then Mariko went and found some tablets that someone had once gotten from the dispensary for fever, and gave them to his mother. Others washed her face and breast from time to time.

At one point another man had quietly entered the room and now Namugwere turned to him–her husband's lineage brother, his father's brother's son. 'Hamala, are you here too?' she asked. 'Thank you for coming. If I die maybe you'll say that I cursed on my death bed–and yet I don't have any bad feeling toward you.' Then she turned to us and said, 'Have you white people come too? Thank you–you can take me to the health centre.'

At this her husband went to fetch his rosary and invited us all to pray for his wife. The prayers were pronounced in Luganda, the language in which the Bible and Missal were written. The sick woman joined in the prayers occasionally, then fell into silence interspersed with moaning and trembling.

We did not take Namugwere to the health centre that night; she seemed a bit better and slept until morning. The next day she said nothing about spirits, but her body still ached and her family took her to Butaleja on the afternoon bus. The medical assistant diagnosed fever and admitted her overnight, but after discharge she still did not feel well.

Ten days later, her husband went to visit a well-known Muslim diviner and medicine man. He claimed that the divination revealed a villain and his methods. Namugwere had been the victim of sorcery worked by Hamala, the very brother of her husband who had come to see her on the night she fell sick. Conniving with the wife of another lineage brother, he had scooped sand from Namugwere's footprints, and gotten hold of a bit of her hair and a piece of her clothing. These things they tied together with medicine and hid, in order to take her life. The Muslim medicine

man instructed her husband to bring sand from the footprints of his brother so that they might counter the sorcery. That diagnosis was followed up by calling a specialist who found a sorcery bundle, turned back its evil upon those who made it, burned it in the bush, and gave healing medicine to Namugwere. Still her dis-ease continued off and on in the months that followed.

Marking a course

Three aspects of these events may serve to mark the course that I shall pursue in these pages. The first is the stance of inquiry and uncertainty. Misfortune raises questions: what is the matter? why is this happening? what is to be done? The second is the probing response to uncertainty. Misfortune demands action and evaluation of consequences. People try medicines, rituals, and the services of experts in their attempts to alleviate the problem and limit uncertainty. Finally, uncertainty and response are linked to broader social and moral concerns that shape and are shaped by them. The process of questioning, doubting, and trying out is about social relationships as well as individual disorders.

Namugwere's family members were active people, exploring their problems, dealing hopefully with uncertainty, suffering, and contingency. In this vein I shall emphasize the pragmatic approach Nyole take to misfortune, their considerations of consequences, their attempts at control, and their reflections on their enterprises. I shall argue, in the terms used by the American pragmatist John Dewey, that Nyole are engaged in a search for security rather than a quest for certainty. Documenting their lives in the spirit of pragmatism means describing the ambiguities and failures of their efforts as well as the effective marshalling of ideas and resources.

The dichotomy between an anthropology of practical reason in which actors are involved in solving problems and realizing values, and an anthropology of culture that examines patterns of communication and meaning in social life is a false one, because problems are always engaged in terms of social meanings (Sahlins 1976). Michael Jackson sees in the pragmatism of John Dewey (and in the radical empiricism of William James) the posssibility of an anthropology of social experience:

> It is sometimes thought that this instrumental theory of truth reduces all ideas to a matter of practical expediency or personal whim. But in going beyond the traditional empiricist's correspondence theory of truth, Dewey wanted to emphasize that ideas have to be tested against the *whole* of our experience – sense perceptions as well as moral values, scientific aims as well as communal goals. For Dewey, both the source

> and the consummation of ideas lie within the social world to which we inescapably belong (Jackson 1989: 14).

Thus I see no contradiction between an appreciation of pragmatism and a concern to explicate Nyole notions of value, power, personhood, and social identity as they unfold in practice and conversation. We can only understand the experience of suffering by seeing subjects in 'local moral worlds' and asking what is at stake for them (Kleinman and Kleinman 1991). In describing Nyole actors in their local moral world, I emphasize the stakes in the sense of what people are striving for, and the resources, including the meaningful ideas, with which they try to accomplish their desires.

The Nyole ideal of the good life and the nature of adversity set the theoretical issue of uncertainty in chapter 1. Here I praise pragmatism for its appreciation of the embedded actor, but find it insufficient for the task of ethnography. Cultural analysis is necessary to understand the symptomatic and explanatory idioms that actors put into practice. The local world in which Nyole people pursue prosperity and health is shaped by the historical processes and family concerns described in chapter 2. The conditions of rural life are affected by the way Bunyole has been integrated in the nation and simultaneously left to its own devices, as war in other parts of the country and economic decline blighted hopes for development. But people do not experience history and political economy directly. They live in an everyday world of social interaction where prosperity is pursued amidst the micro-politics of domestic life. Marriage and children are both 'stakes' and matters of uncertainty.

The precarious nature of existence is a cultural phenomenon in the sense that experience of peril and response to it are socially mediated in ways that are shared. Chapter 3 is devoted to divination, the privileged forum of the explanatory idiom where people confront uncertainty and develop plans for dealing with it. There in the diviner's hut, uncertainty is formally constructed in an attempt not to resolve it conclusively, but to lay a course of action.

The fundamental question in the explanatory idiom is 'Who are you?', a question that is posed about the agent but reflects upon the victim. The following five chapters are devoted to the agents of misfortune, described as meaningful ideas and modes of practice with distinctive social consequences. There are the agents you cannot see – spirits of clanship, ancestral shades, and 'peripheral' spirits. Dealing with the invisible might seem to be a more uncertain proposition than interacting with tangible living people. But assertive mechanisms such as public ritual and spirit pos-

session allow open declarations about these agents. The human agents whose hearts you do not fully know – cursers and sorcerers – are greater sources of danger and uncertainty. In the gnawing of suspicion and in the pain of recalcitrant suffering, you come to wonder about the moral ambiguity of social life.

The five chapters on spirit and human agents of misfortune are arranged in order of increasing uncertainty. I begin at home with the shades of the dead in chapter 4. These are the most familiar of the agents – your own parents and grandparents become simpler through death. The words and sacrifices shared with family are fundamental strategies for securing a home and rights to resources. The pragmatic principles of negotiation and trying out are common in dealing with shades. But there is little doubt about your enduring ties and obligations to the dead.

Clan spirits, described in chapter 5, are concerned with the fertility that should fill a home with people and plenty. Although you are also 'permanently' linked to your clan spirit, there are more uncertainties about its demands and it is less a part of daily life than the shades of your forebears. The 'little spirits' of chapter 6 have an even more random quality. They are only about affliction; they have no existence in social life apart from their threats to child survival. They are not beings with whom you ought to maintain a link as part of your kinship identity – though they tend to entangle themselves with the contingencies of family histories until you can mobilize to ceremonially bid them farewell.

Of the human agents, cursers are the more knowable. In chapter 7, I show how words and offerings are supposed to resolve the doubts about relations to senior relatives. But I emphasize the ambivalence people feel when suffering is not alleviated and when they feel unsure about the real intentions of those who have power over them. Sorcery, explored in chapter 8, is the most dangerous threat to well-being. Secrecy and silence feed suspicion; there are seldom any public declarations that could clear the air. When people speak in terms of sorcery, they relate their worst fears about malice and resentment to their experience of suffering and death.

The 1990s have brought more questions. Although biomedicine has become more widely available, it has so far failed to live up to its promise of effective treatment. Moreover, a new disease, AIDS, for which biomedicine offers little hope, has appeared in every neighbourhood. In chapter 9, I examine local experience and experimentation with biomedicine and AIDS. These recent developments can also be understood in terms of a pragmatics of uncertainty. And they provide new perspectives on Nyole ideas about human and spirit agents.

Work in progress: 1969–1996

This book is based on work in Bunyole County that has spanned twenty-five years. My husband Michael and I moved into an unused teacher's house at Mulagi Primary School, 2 miles west of Busolwe trading centre in February 1969. We lived there until April 1971, with occasional trips to Kampala where we were affiliated with the Makerere Institute of Social Research. Our house was on an all-weather road, near the Roman Catholic mission which had run the school until it was taken over by the government. As we soon found out, it was conveniently located for the curious, the friendly, and the bored. Children stopped by after school, women looked in on the way to church, and men waiting for the bus came to greet us. We enjoyed sociability as guests too and learned the Nyole art of gracious hospitality on wooden folding chairs, around pots of warm millet beer and over great mounds of steaming bananas.

Our car was an important part of our participation in Nyole life in those years. There were always things that needed to be somewhere else – sacks of dried cassava to the Bugwere canoe ferry, a goat to a funeral celebration, papyrus mats to market. Even more than things, people needed transport – for ceremonies to be held elsewhere, to visit relatives, and most urgently, in cases of difficult childbirth and sickness. Once a baby was born in the back of our Land Rover, and on more than one occasion we rushed women whose deliveries were going wrong to the hospital in Tororo. Then there were the corpses of those whom the health centre or hospital had failed to help. Those fit in the car too.

In the course of our first two years in Bunyole, we were assisted by several young men and women who helped us in our efforts to learn Lunyole, translated when we did not understand well enough, and worked on the systematic collection of information on given topics. They were all local residents and we got to know their families and neighbours. There were particular older people as well, who helped us regularly. Perhaps they could be called key informants. And there were the two families that each adopted one of us, so that I could be the daughter of one clan and the wife of another. But living in a place like Bunyole for so long, where the population is dense and people are friendly, you learn from many people, though you are more deeply involved with some.

No previous ethnographic research had been done in Bunyole, although several manuscripts had been written by Nyole who were interested in their own culture. So we tried to explore many different topics. We interviewed people on agriculture, history, kinship, and economics, and made lists of clans, market prices, and colour terms. In order to gather basic social and economic data, we carried out household surveys in two

communities: Bubaali where there were twenty-nine homes and Buhabeba where there were fifty-five. Up in the bat-infested loft of the local courthouse, a helpful official found the case records for three years, 1964, 1965, and 1969, which we set an assistant to copying.

Within weeks of our arrival, several new friends suggested that if I really wanted to understand Bunyole, I should study adversity and its social causes: 'Nyole are good people, but we make each other suffer.' The cultural importance of explanations for misfortune was evident in the way themes of spirits, cursing, and sorcery were woven into accounts of Nyole history, kinship, and neighbourhood. Nyole spoke with a combination of pride and chagrin about how their neighbours in southern Uganda feared their powers and respected/dreaded their diviners and medicine men. Nyole consciousness of their own culture and the weighty tradition of anthropological research on interpretations of misfortune drew me to these topics. But equally important was the frequency of adversity itself. Sickness was a part of everyday life, and funeral ceremonies were the most common rituals.

In my efforts to understand Nyole approaches to misfortune, I 'collected' cases that I heard about through acquaintances and our field assistants, where possible following them as they unfolded, and sometimes getting involved by taking people to the hospital or attending divinations and therapeutic rituals. I worked closely with three diviners who kept records of their cases or had them recorded by someone else over several weeks. In all, I accumulated information on about 300 divinations. I went regularly to discuss the cases with these three men, occasionally sitting in on consultations and tape recording a few sessions. In time people got to know of my interest in misfortune and the rituals intended to alleviate it. They invited me to attend funerals and offerings, and they told me of events and issues and rumours that they thought might interest me. It is the results of these people's generosity that form the content of this book.

We left Bunyole four months after Amin's coup in 1971 and years followed in which our contact with friends there was limited to very sporadic letters. We managed to visit them for a week in 1979, but it was not until the end of the 1980s that we really went back to Bunyole. I spent two months there in 1989 and 1990, and five months in 1992–3. In 1994 we embarked on a long-term research training project on health in Tororo District that takes me to Bunyole two or three times a year. So this book is a kind of progress report.

Going back in the late 1980s, we took up old friendships, whose value seemed the greater for having survived so many years. At first, we stayed in Busolwe, the trading centre, with former neighbours who had moved

0.1 The author and friend Veronica Musimami on the papyrus-choked Mpologoma River (1992)

to 'town'. The man who had jokingly claimed Michael as his child during our first period of field research, together with his sons, urged him to put up a house on their land, as a son should do. In time our game about being members of local families was translated into bricks and corrugated iron sheets. When we finally formally 'entered' our own house in early 1993, with help from my adopted family as well as Michael's, it was with a sense of increasing engagement and, I think, mild wonder on all parts, at the way 'playing' at relationship has become increasingly serious.

When I started going back to Bunyole in 1989, I concentrated on the local appropriation of biomedicine, whose presence in Bunyole had been strengthened by the building of a hospital at Busolwe. But the continuities in the 'explanatory idiom' I had studied two decades before intrigued me too. I visited diviners and even got one to keep a record of his clients (forty cases) for a one month period. I attended ceremonies, interviewed mediums, and followed developments in the lives of family and neighbours, as well as sitting in drug shops and talking to health workers.

Re-studies by anthropologists often concentrate on transformations in social life and economic conditions (Colson 1971; Wilson 1977). There have been changes in Bunyole that we too have documented (M. Whyte 1988; S. Whyte 1991a; Whyte and Whyte 1992). However, the changes have been additive in the form of more variety, rather than revolutionary in the sense of essential transformation. When we resurveyed the villages of Bubaali (now forty-seven households) and Buhabeba (fifty-two households), we found that rural life had changed very little in terms of social and economic fundamentals. In fact, the lack of 'development' was a constant theme in conversation. The roads are worse, and many people are poorer now than they were then, despite the new hospital and the increased trade in food crops.

The chronology of our fieldwork, and the patterns of continuity and change, raise more than the usual problems about what tense to use in writing. Much of the material presented derives from dialogues more than twenty years old. Clearly this should be related in the past tense, as Harris (1978) and Fernandez (1982) chose to do in their publications of old fieldwork data. Yet many of the concerns and practices I studied then are still current, and recent inquiries have allowed me to fill out points that I started to explore long ago. This sense of continuity reflects my own continuing position as listener, analyst and author, making the ethnographic present an honest choice (Hastrup 1992: 127–8). But to conflate everything in the present is to miss the opportunity for time depth that comes of keeping touch with a place over many years. So I have chosen to follow the practical advice of Davis (1992) in choosing tenses as they seem appropriate, letting present (1989–96) and persisting patterns be

present, and events and past patterns be past – as best I can separate them. In the text I date events and dialogues as they appear.

Spelling and grammar are easier to deal with. I have used the orthography agreed upon by the Lunyole Language Committee (M. Whyte and LLC 1994). The Lunyole language has seventeen noun classes. In order to simplify the matter for readers unfamiliar with Bantu linguistics, I use the root 'Nyole' for people and as an adjective in English. Following Ugandan conventions, I retain prefixes for the place (county), Bunyole, and the language, Lunyole.

The people whom I was able to ask said they would like to have their real names used in this book. I have followed their wishes except in cases where conflicts and secrecy were involved (as in sorcery matters). I have also used pseudonyms where I feel it would be a breach of confidence to identify individuals.