

THE EVENING
OF OUR LIVES
ELEGY FOR
AKONYI BEDO

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Samuel spent the 2007-2008 academic year in Lagos, Nigeria researching the megacity as his Synaptic project and participated in the 2008 EXPOSURE-Aftermath photojournalism workshop in Northern Uganda.

Throughout the course of 22 years of conflict in Northern Uganda, Lazarus Nyero never left home. His village hut was not burned, unlike nearly every other hut in the area. He was never harmed, unlike the tens of thousands killed and maimed. The conflict uprooted nearly 1.9 million people, who fled their villages to sprawling camps for Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). For more than 15 years, Lazarus lived in isolation.

Like his father, and many generations before him, Lazarus was born in Akonyi Bedo, a small Acholi village located 15 kilometers outside of Gulu town. Like his father, he was a farmer. His plot produced beans, maize, sugar cane and groundnuts. Next to his hut was a mango tree, which produced fruit for his family and shade for his visitors. He built the home with his hands. He has lived there for 73 years.

In the late 1980s, the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) began attacking civilians and abducting children. By the mid-1990s, Akonyi Bedo was abandoned, with most residents relocating to the nearby Unyama IDP camp. The LRA rebels came to Lazarus' home often, demanding to know where the government soldiers were located. He did not know. They left him.

He had a family. His wife passed away at a young age. Of his four children, some were abducted, some returned.

In 2004, the Ugandan Army forced Lazarus to move closer to the village's main road, where his safety could be better monitored by government troops who were assigned to protect the area. During this time, his original home was demolished, not by LRA attacks, but by termites.

He has never seen money, but maintains himself with quiet dignity. He keeps his one pair of nice shoes on a shelf in his hut. They are creased and weathered, but shined. On his straw mat, he keeps a neatly folded, thread bare blanket. He uses a rope to hold up his oversized trousers. His bones are fragile and his skin loose. His face is carved with deep crevices and his eyes burn like black embers.

"I am the winner," he says. He knows survival.

When he can, he sips the local 'dry water,' a potent local gin made with fermented cassava. Adong, his 70-year old neighbor, serves him a glass. Adong only recently returned to the village after many years in the Unyama camp. Back in the village she spends her days brewing gin and tending to small children. She laughs as the baby in her lap tries to suck her breast. "I am dry," she chuckles. Her dress stays loose, occasionally revealing ancient traces of motherhood. She pours herself a hot glass as well.

These are the elderly. Since the conflict ceasefire, they are the first to return home to the land that nurtured them.

They enjoy simple pleasures. They are forever patient. But life is ephemeral. When a neighbor dies, they come together to fulfill their obligations.

In Acholiland, safe passage for the deceased is not ensured until three nights after the body is placed in the earth. Three nights after the death of a neighbor, Lazarus, Adong and the other village elders trek through the bush to join the family in mourning. They arrive as the sun sets. Adong sits on the floor with the other women. Lazarus takes a chair. With one cup and a large plastic jug, they share dry water until their minds are thoroughly engulfed by memories. Elderly men take turns beating cowhide drums with heavy wooden sticks. Elderly women scrape gourds across a log. They all sing.

With slow, wobbly steps and shuffles, they gather around the drummer. Lazarus gradually rises from his chair and joins the rickety group of dancing elders. Though his fragile frame can no longer keep up with the frenetic Acholi stomp, his movements are graceful and composed. Without losing a step, he grabs his staff and triumphantly raises it to the heavens.

So much depends on the rhythm. Singing turns to shrieking, which in turn leads to more stomping. Periodically while dancing, old women tilt their heads back and wail into the sky. The tears flow deep into the night, but the bodies do not stop swaying to the drum. Joy and sorrow blend in the stomp. This is the release. With sweat and tears, the Acholi confront death and celebrate life. The stomping continues until old bones can no longer stand straight.

For 22 years, the Acholi were unable to perform their cultural obligations to the dead. During the conflict, a body could sometimes be transported to the village during the day and quickly buried without ceremony. More commonly, the elders would be forced to conduct haphazard ceremonies within cramped and foreign IDP camps.

But now, they can resume their duties. Sipping dry water in the twilight, exhausted elders huddle around a small bonfire, discussing the legacy of their culture. For the first time in nearly two decades they can feel free to pass the night in

the village and properly celebrate their deceased brothers and sisters. But what is missing is that which has always been missing since the conflict. The youth have not returned.

Abducted, displaced and uprooted, the youth remain scattered. Many have spent their entire lives in IDP camps. They have no connection to the land that nurtured the generations before them. This distresses the elders, whose duty it is to preserve and pass on the culture. But the youth are not around.

An ancient face around the fire proclaims, "This is the evening of our lives. The hours are weak. Let us not allow our culture to fade away into the night." They discuss until the new day arrives.

For Lazarus, it is the same as any day. Using his walking staff, he slowly eases himself from the wooden chair where he passed the night. One by one with trembling fingers, he fastens the buttons of the coarse canvas jacket covering his bare chest. The youth have not returned. Like so many days before, he quietly resumes the solitary march to his field.



PHOTO CAPTIONS - LEFT TO RIGHT, TOP TO BOTTOM:
 LAZARUS NYERU, AGE 73, OF THE VILLAGE OF AKONYI BEDO IN NORTHERN UGANDA.
 AFTER THE DEATH OF AN ELDER IN AKONYI BEDO, THE BODY IS TRANSPORTED TO THE BURIAL SITE.
 THE VILLAGE PREPARES FOR THE BURIAL CEREMONY.

THE CASKET IS PREPARED FOR BURIAL.
 THE DECEASED IS BURIED WITH HIS ANCESTORS IN THE FAMILY COMPOUND.
 IN ANTICIPATION FOR THE BURIAL CEREMONY, GLASSES OF LOCAL BREW ARE SHARED AMONG THE VILLAGE ELDERS.



PHOTO CAPTIONS: LEFT TO RIGHT, TOP TO BOTTOM.

A WOMAN MOURNS THE DEATH OF HER HUSBAND.

VILLAGE ELDERS DANCE AROUND A CEREMONIAL FIRE, CELEBRATING THEIR DECEASED BROTHER'S SUCCESSFUL TRANSITION BACK INTO THE EARTH.

WOMEN PREPARE MILLET THE MORNING AFTER THE BURIAL CEREMONY.

THE MORNING AFTER THE BURIAL CEREMONY, LAZARUS RETURNS TO HIS FIELD.

LAZARUS' SHADOW.

EVENING FALLS ON THE VILLAGE OF AKONYI BEDO.