

## SHAKESPEARE IN THE UGANDAN BUSH

During two weeks of teaching medical anthropology at Gulu University in northern Uganda, I took one day off to see a bit of the countryside. My guide was a young Acholi man called Sunday. While we exchanged information about ourselves and talked about the things and people we passed, something happened that reminded me of Laura Bohannon's account of a conversation she had with Tiv elders in Nigeria about Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (Bohannon 1966).

On the eve of her departure to the field, the American, Bohannon, had found herself in a dispute with a British friend about Shakespeare. 'You Americans', the friend had said, 'often have difficulty with Shakespeare. He was after all, a very English poet, and one can easily misinterpret the universal by misunderstanding the particular' (p. 28). An argument evolved and to end it, the friend gave her a copy of *Hamlet* to read in the African bush. 'By prolonged meditation', Bohannon summarizes her friend's words, she might 'achieve the grace of correct interpretation' (ibid).

In her hut in the homestead of a respected Tiv elder, Bohannon studied Shakespeare's famous play again. One morning the elders asked her to tell them what was in the papers she was reading. It was the wet season, when people are confined to their houses and have little else to do but tell stories and drink large amounts of local millet and maize beer. Bohannon told them the tragic story of the young prince and his conflict with his father's brother and his mother. She tried to explain what a ghost was, why a king would have only one wife, why Hamlet became mad, and how and why the various characters were killed. Throughout her storytelling, the elders shook their heads and criticized the many mistakes made by the people in the play. Bohannon got desperate and threatened to stop the story. One old man soothed her: 'You told the story well ... but it is clear that the elders of your country never told you what the story really means ... We believe you when you say that your marriage customs are different, or your clothes and weapons. But people are the same everywhere; therefore, there are always witches ... We, who are elders, will instruct you in their [the stories'] true meaning, so that when you return to your own land your elders will see that you have not been sitting in the bush, but among those who know things and who have taught you wisdom'.

While taking me around, Sunday told me many stories about his own life in that war-stricken part of his country. He described how he commuted every evening from his home to the centre of Gulu town to spend the night in a safe place where the fighters of Joseph Kony's Lord's Resistance Army would not find him, returning home the next day to take



Fig. 1. One of the camps in 2009. Two years after the order to 'return to where the war found you', most people left and houses were deserted and demolished.

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a bath and go to school. For five years, he and his family had on many nights slept away from their home. While we passed villages along the road, Sunday pointed out the location of camps where the villagers had been forced to live for up to 10 years, deserting their houses and farms. The camps were meant to protect the villagers, and also to prevent the 'rebels' from finding the two things they needed most urgently: food and child soldiers. We passed a former camp, the village of Lukodi, where an international organization had erected a small monument in memory of more than 40 people who had been killed during a revenge attack by the rebels in 2004 (Justice and Reconciliation Project 2011). Three men who accompanied us to the monument told us what had happened and revealed that the real number of people killed had been closer to 80.

Sunday also talked about his present life. He had a wife and two small children. I asked him the name of his wife. She was called Juliet. I joked and said that if she was Juliet, his name should have been Romeo. He did not understand me; he had never heard of the fateful couple and the name Shakespeare did not ring a bell either. I told him the sad story of Romeo and Juliet's love: about the long conflict between the two families, the Capulets and the Montagues; the secret meetings of the two lovers; the balcony; the difference between the songs of the nightingale and the lark; the fatal misunderstanding that made Romeo think that his love, Juliet, had died; how he took poison that killed him and how Juliet, on waking up, saw the dead body of her lover and stabbed herself to death with Romeo's knife. After the many stories about rape and murder in the countryside we were passing through, we had landed in 16th-century Italy, with a story about pure love, but about fighting and death nevertheless.

When I had finished my summary of Shakespeare's play, Sunday was quiet for a moment while manoeuvring past a woman on a bicycle on the narrow and bumpy bush road. I expected a comment from him about the silliness

of romantic love or a disapproving remark about suicide. Those who have survived violence, hunger and war can often respond with criticism and anger when hearing about people in affluent societies taking their lives for 'futile' reasons such as love. But Sunday's thoughts went in a very different direction. He asked me: 'Did the two families reconcile after this had happened?' He took me by surprise. I did not remember any happy ending and shook my head.

That was the moment I was reminded of Bohannon's conversation with the Tiv elders and their interpretation of Hamlet's story. If Shakespeare had lived among the Tiv, he would have used a different plot. And the same applied to his *Romeo and Juliet*, I reasoned. He would have ended with the African way of solving the conflict: not by punishment and more violence, but by prolonged discussion ending in a peace deal. Sunday shook his head: the Verona families had made a big mistake and missed an opportunity to end their long feud.

Sunday's reaction was not only a reflection of age-old Acholi ideas of resolving conflicts and wrongdoings through reconciliation rather than retribution. He made his comments at a time when Acholi communities were struggling with the aftermath of the war between the Ugandan army and the rebels of the Lord's Resistance Army. People had finally left the camps to go back to their villages and former rebels and abducted children had returned home. Victims and perpetrators found themselves living together again and were trying to resume ordinary life in a highly uneasy and volatile situation. NGOs (non-governmental organizations) and local social and religious groups had set up counselling projects and organized meetings and workshops to encourage people to forgive one another and start a new life. Acholi traditions and cleansing rituals were employed, but also the teachings of Christian churches that were strongly present in the area (van Rest 2007; Meindert et al. 2014; Whyte et al. 2015).



**Fig. 2.** Sunday's family members, who had been buried in the camp, were exhumed and re-interred at home.

**Fig. 3.** A 70-year-old woman in an IDP camp with some of her grandchildren. The rebels killed her husband and cut off her ears. She had five children; two boys and three girls. Two of her sons were killed by the LRA and two of her daughters died of HIV/AIDS.

The atrocities committed by unknown rebels or government soldiers were not the main problem; their cruelties were in a sense beyond forgiveness since they were not a part of people's everyday lives. The real challenge was to come to terms with the 'intimate enemies' – neighbours, and even relatives, who had caused suffering and death and were now living beside them. 'You forgive a face you know' (Whyte et al. 2015).

Forgiving ('untying' in Acholi language) meant that the knot in one's heart had to be untied so that the person was 'free' to re-establish relations with the former enemy. Such reconciliation was not usually achieved through the performance of a public ritual, nor even by speaking to one another, but by doing things that silently communicated peace and forgiveness. Sunday's concern about the reconciliation of the two Verona families reflected an omnipresent anxiety in his own community. But Shakespeare's play had other concerns and other lessons – at least that was what I had suggested to Sunday.

Had my answer been correct? I started to have doubts and when I arrived back at the hotel I checked the story via my shortcut to information, Wikipedia: 'Romeo and Juliet is ... about two young star-crossed lovers whose deaths ultimately reconcile their feuding families'. I was pleasantly surprised and went on to read the apotheosis in the play itself. The reconciliation is announced at the very beginning in one line of the prologue:

Two households, both alike in dignity,  
In fair Verona, where we lay our scene,  
From ancient grudge break to new mutiny,  
Where civil blood makes civil hands unclean.  
From forth the fatal loins of these two foes  
A pair of star-cross'd lovers take their life;  
Whose misadventured piteous overthrows  
Do with their death bury their parents' strife.  
(my italics)

Finally as the play comes to an end, the heads of the two families stand aside the dead bodies of their son and daughter. The prince of Verona addresses them:

Where be these enemies? Capulet! Montague!  
See, what a scourge is laid upon your hate

Capulet responds:

O brother Montague, give me thy hand:  
This is my daughter's jointure, for no more  
Can I demand.

I looked for the meaning of 'jointure' (it is not easy to read Shakespeare in the bush): 'An arrangement by which a man sets aside property to be used for the support of his wife after his death' (www.memidex.com). Shakespeare's fluency in metaphors overwhelms me.



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Montague reacts:

But I can give thee more:  
For I will raise her statue in pure gold;  
That while Verona by that name is known,  
There shall no figure at such rate be set  
As that of true and faithful Juliet.

Not to be outdone, Capulet promises to make an equally costly statue of Romeo:

As rich shall Romeo's by his lady's lie,  
Poor sacrifices of our enmity.

The prince concludes the play in sombre words:

A glooming peace this morning with it brings;  
The sun, for sorrow, will not show his head

What a depressing, yet happy end – no wonder I overlooked it. But now, reading it in the African bush made me see the prince as a mediator between the two family heads who were seeking reconciliation through mutual compensation.

Sunday was satisfied when I told him the next day that peace had indeed been made between the two families. And the Tiv elders would undoubtedly have nodded their heads in agreement about the ending of the play. Shakespeare's conclusion would have pleased

them. The English playwright could have been their ancestor.

But this was not the end of my story. One week after my discussion with Sunday I returned from Gulu to Entebbe with another driver from the university, a man called David, aged around 35 and father of two young children. The journey took almost 10 hours, so there was ample time for Juliet and Romeo. David had heard about the story but did not remember what happened between the two. I told him and asked for his opinion. Romeo had made a mistake, he replied. He should not have imposed his own way against the will of his parents. He should have talked to them, pleaded, debated. 'But what if they had maintained their opposition to his love?' I interrupted. David hesitated. Romeo should have given up his love for Juliet, he finally concluded. I asked if *he* would have done the same if *his* parents had objected to his wife a few years ago. He needed no time to think about his answer: he would not have obeyed them.

After 100 km or so, we picked up another passenger, Sebastian, about the same age as David and father of three children. Sebastian was working at the university in administration. He was travelling to Kampala to meet the daughter of his older brother to advise





**Fig. 4.** The Matu Oput ceremony culminates in drinking the juice of the bitter root of the Oput tree. The ritual is meant to reconcile two clans after a killing.

**Fig. 5.** Acholi countryside.

**Fig. 6.** Monument in memory of the mass killing in Lukodi.

**Fig. 7.** The body of a 15-year-old boy killed by a landmine is taken home for burial.

her on a love affair that had brought about a serious rift between her and her parents. The daughter had fallen in love with a much older

man, a 'man of God' (Sebastian's fingers made the sign of inverted commas). 'A kind of priest?' I asked. Yes, a kind of priest. The scene was set for another discussion about the 'star-crossed lovers'. I invited David to tell the story. Sebastian, who already had his niece in his thoughts, commented in a self-assured tone that Romeo should have exercised patience. I wanted to ask him about Juliet, who had been completely left out of his and David's judge-

ments on the matter, but I decided not to interrupt him. He continued to say that one should not rush in such difficult situations, and gave examples of how he would always remain calm when debates threatened to explode into fights. One should not give up listening to one another, he insisted. He added that he was going to advise his niece and her parents the same thing: they should talk, talk, talk, until they agreed.

I have not heard how Sebastian's counselling session with his niece went and the final outcome of his peacemaking mission will probably remain uncertain for a long period of time, but my search for Shakespeare in the bush had to reach a provisional conclusion. The Tiv elders would almost certainly have criticized Romeo severely for his impetuous behaviour, his excessive passion, his secrecy and his disrespect for his parents. But are there not also many African folktales and legends about mistakes and wrongdoings? Are these not lessons that teach the listeners what they should not do?

I suspect that the Tiv elders would have both nodded and shaken their heads as the love story unfolded and would have concluded that the outcome was right. But a second suspicion has crossed my mind, though a very speculative one I admit. I suspect that several of those old men would have given the same answer as David did when I asked him whether he himself would have listened to his parents if they had obstructed his love. Being well versed in the rules and conventions of one's culture does not prevent one from breaking those rules by following one's emotions.

But what impressed me most in all of this was how the Tiv elders in Bohannon's account repeated and reformulated what her English friend had told her about misinterpreting the universal by misunderstanding the particular. People are the same everywhere. Marriage customs, uncles and weapons may be 'particular', mere details, but some things are universal. The necessity for peace in daily life is one such universal; not listening to advice about love is another. ●

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