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When Neighbours Become Killers:
Ethnic Conflict and Communal
Violence in Western Uganda

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Introduction[1]

One Sunday afternoon in 2003, a small multi-ethnic village in Western Uganda was caught up in a deadly confrontation. Local men attacked and killed their neighbours in the trading centre. The assaults were carried out face-to-face with machetes, spears and blunt objects. The violent seemed sudden and erratic, and it was over in a matter of hours. Most victims were local men who happened to be in the trading centre, but women and children had not been spared either. The event came to be known as Black Sunday.

Black Sunday took place during a district land redistribution in Kibaale District. The following day all major Ugandan newspapers put the incident on the front page. The cause of violence was identified as "land wrangles" between the indigenous Banyoro and immigrant ethnic groups. In the capital Kampala rumours of ethnic cleansing in the region were rampant. Evoking images of Rwanda and Bosnia, only four people were killed and about twenty-five injured during Black Sunday. The paradox raises a number of troubling questions. Why did neighbours become killers in this particular village? Why did the violence appear to be sudden and arbitrary? And how could neighbours be so brutal against their ethnic others?

The aim of this paper is to explore these initial questions about Black Sunday. The analytical focus is *communal violence*, a generic term adopted from the anthropological literature on South Asia. Communal violence usually refers to situations where neighbours are perpetrators and victims in their own community. Although similar phenomena take place in Africa, they are not conceptualised as communal violence. A central purpose of this paper is therefore to apply this ethnographically specific concept in a new African context.

The paper is divided into four sections. It starts with a discussion of approaches to communal violence. Then, in order to situate Black Sunday in its socio-historical context it presents the regional and local circumstances of the violent conjuncture. In the third section, the paper gives a detailed reconstruction of the unfolding of Black Sunday. The last section is an analysis of why neighbours became killers. It will be argued that communal violence is a particular form of meaningful collective action. This implies that a number of features, among them the pivotal role of rumours in the dynamics of ethnic contention and communal violence. My argument is that rumours are not simply a response to ethnic contention but constitutive of it. Moreover, this constitution is productive of communal violence.

1. Approaches to communal violence

While collective violence used to be a phenomenon that anthropologists kept silent about, it has indeed become a popular topic in the contemporary study of post-Cold War Africa. Despite the popularity of the topic, none of the most recent contributions uses the concept *communal violence* in African ethnography, whereas in South and Southeast Asia there is a burgeoning literature on similar phenomena. Communal violence combines two classic domains of inquiry in anthropology, ethnicity and violence, in one conceptual framework. In this paper I will focus on theories of violence. Theoretically this paper will borrow from two distinct approaches in the anthropology of violence. Although they are not mutually exclusive, some major differences have to be delineated.

While the first approach focuses on violence driven by instrumental concerns such as resources or political representation, the second approaches communal violence and rioting as more multifaceted phenomena that are not necessarily driven by instrumental concerns. Before I discuss different approaches to violence, there is a need to clarify the definitional issues under consideration.

The key feature of communal violence is that it involves people attacking neighbours with different social identities within a limited rural or urban geographical space. This preliminary demarcation immediately raises a number of related concerns, especially about the conceptualisation of the adjective "communal". The full range of semantic connotations of "communal" are excessive to the particular usage in this paper (cf. Tambiah 1996: 26). Here, the term has two broad implications. First, it refers to "community" as a local social world of neighbours who live in relatively close physical proximity. This does not of course necessarily entail close social proximity between people with different social identities. Then it refers to larger ethnic, national or religious communities in the broadest sense of the term. So considered, "communal" refers to more than the site of a village or neighbourhood; it is also the conjuncture of social, economic and political fields at different scales of inquiry. Here I will argue that communal violence is particularly suitable as an analytical focus for political situations where neighbours become killers.

The first approach can be regarded as the conventional approach to the nexus of ideas about ethnicity, conflict and violence, which are often referred to as the instrumentalist approach. Here I will consider the contributions of David Riches (1986; 1991), who has undoubtedly come up with the most influential anthropological conceptualisation of violence.[2] The basic definition offered by Riches is that violence is primarily contested physical hurt. Riches proposes a dynamic triangle of violence between perpetrators, unwilling victims and witnesses. He maintains that the goals of violence can be practical or symbolic, but the core purpose is instrumental. Since the act involves physical assault on an unwilling person, it also rules out force that is seen as legitimate in a given situation, such as forms of ritual violence or masochism. Conventional social science literature has tended to distinguish between violence and legitimate force, the latter term designated for state force. Riches claims that the legitimacy of all violence is contested. This point is now widely accepted.

It is clear that Riches's approach can offer persuasive insights into the linkages between conflict and violence, but it runs the risk of bracketing other aspects of violent events. The major flaw in this approach is its overemphasis on instrumental aspects behind ethnic violence such as choice and strategy. This leads to a number of limitations. First, like an instrumentalist/constructivist approach to ethnicity (Barth 1969) it fails to recognise the situational suspense, fear and passion of collective violence. Second, Riches's approach suffers from an aridity of analytical detachment from its subject. Consequently, it also fails to account for the brutal reality of violence and suffering.

The second approach which specifically deals with communal violence and rioting is largely associated with Paul Brass (1997), Veena Das (1990a, 1995) and Stanley Tambiah 1986, 1990, 1996.[3] The list could also include Jonathan Spencer's (1990, 1992) contributions on communal violence in Sri Lanka, especially because of his attention to rumour dynamics and the moral factors of communal violence. Their theorising of communal violence is largely focused around events that took place in South Asia in the 1980s and 1990s. The authors cited arrive at heuristically useful, although differing notions communal violence. While it would be beyond the scope of this paper to review the full breath of this literature, the following section highlights some important theoretical points that emerge for the discussion of communal violence.

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[2] See Abbink (2000), Broch-Due (2005), Krohn-Hansen (1994), Richards (2005), Schmidt and Schröder (2001), and Stewart and Strathern (2002).

[3] Here I have to make it clear that Paul Brass is not an anthropologist, although he is often cited in anthropological discussions of communal violence.

Tambiah (1996) and Das (1990a) point out that one has to take the larger context into account in order to understand the psychology of crowd behaviour. Their cases from South Asia clearly show that communal violence is part of a larger political landscape and not isolated community events. On the contrary, small and localised incidents of communal violence have turned into widespread violence and rioting across the region.

I have already pointed out some shortcomings of an instrumental approach to communal violence. One is that it fails to account for the excessive force used during communal violence, as well as the suddenness with which such violence occurs. Tambiah (1996: 276), drawing on Simmel, asserts that the sudden imposition of difference among people who are essentially similar and have lived in relative harmony unleashes greater hatred than violence perpetrated against strangers. The greater the blurring of categories between neighbours, he argues, the more fiercely the boundary between "us" and "them" will be drawn. Consequently, the enemy as neighbour is killed with greater passion than a complete stranger.

Finally, I address the pivotal role of rumours in communal violence, which is well documented in South Asian ethnography. Das (1990, 1998), Spencer (1990, 1992) and Tambiah (1986, 1996) devote considerable attention to rumours and crowd behaviour in their analysis of individual cases as well as in broader theoretical reflections. In *Levelling Crowds,* Tambiah (1996: 266-308) draws on ideas by Le Bon, Canetti and Durkheim to make several important points about the psychology of rumours and crowd behaviour. First, he argues that rumours feed on a dual sensation of rage and panic among the perpetrating group. Then, he introduces levelling as concept covering the various forms of behaviour of rioting crowds. The levelling of people and buildings is coupled with a levelling of the other ethnic group's advantages.

Through the case of Black Sunday, I will show that the two approaches fruitfully supplement each other in the analysis of communal violence. From the points of view raised in the preceding discussion, however, it is clear that communal violence is not an everyday event. It seems to be sudden, impulsive and chaotic – neighbours attacking familiar but random victims. Yet, to say that communal violence is irrational behaviour is misleading. Provided that we recognise its shortcoming, the definition by Riches (1986, 1991) will be the underlying notion of violence as the contested use of force. In this perspective, violence as performance is both practical and expressive. On the other hand, to imply that it is purely a result of strategic action misses the inherent dynamics of crowd action during a communal drama. My argument is that no matter how well pre-empted, the rumour and crowd dynamics of communal violence ignore instrumental concerns, social control and redressive actions.

Whether a general theory of communal violence is possible is beyond the scope of this paper. However, the value of a comparative analytical focus on communal violence is that it allows for an understanding of the phenomenon in a diversity of ethnographic settings, including a rural African context. To round off this brief discussion on theoretical approaches to communal violence, I will delineate some of my own methodological concerns on communal violence in Western Uganda.

I conducted an extensive six-month period of fieldwork in Kibaale District from January to June 2004. Because of my research topic, I centred the fieldwork in the village Businge where Black Sunday had taken place.[4] Like most anthropologists, I was not present during the communal violence, but I entered the field after it had occurred.[5] I felt it imperative to document as much as possible about the event, in order in order to construct a multivocal account of what took place and its later interpretations. Unlike Schmidt and Schröder (2001), I do not find a violent event easy to document and reconstruct. On the contrary, I recognise there is a "hole at the centre" of every event that cannot be filled with "facts" (Brass 1997). Having said that, even the most ardent post-modernist would, I assume, agree that Black Sunday actually took place in Businge. Before I give an account of Black Sunday, I will give an analysis of the regional and local background to of Black

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[4] Businge is a pseudonym, and likewise the names of my informants have been anonymised.
[5] Contrary to Nordstrom and Robben's argument (1995: 4) that one should research violence as it takes place.

Sunday to provide sufficient contextualisation for the communal violence that unfolded in a local community.

2. Politics of belonging in Western Uganda

Kibaale District

Through the 1900 Uganda Agreement the British colonial administration made ethnicity the territorial basis for the creation of administrative boundaries, and divided the country into ethnically defined regions. Western Uganda follows the boundaries of the kingdoms of Ankole, Tooro and Bunyoro, and the region covers eleven districts from the Tanzanian border in the south to the Victoria Nile in the north. The Bantu people who live in Western Uganda are for the most part rural smallholders with significant ethnographic and adaptational similarities. This paper is concerned with the Banyoro who live in Kibaale District and their Bafuruki others. The colonially categorised ethnic groups of the kingdoms are considered to be the indigenous "sons of the soil" in the region. Their ethnic others they refer to as Bafuruki. [6] The negatively connoted ethnonym Bafuruki derives from the Runyoro-Rutooro[7] term *abafruka,* which means "to settle", and it covers all non-Banyoro migrants in Kibaale District regardless of ethnic origin. Most of the Bafuruki are Bakiga from Southern Uganda, but Kibaale is a heterogeneous district with at least 32 official ethnic groups (Uganda Bureau of Statistics 1991).

Kibaale District is the enduring colonial legacy of the 1900 Uganda Agreement, under which a large area was taken from Bunyoro Kingdom and awarded to the British royal allies in neighbouring Buganda Kingdom. Buganda became the centre of the colony while Bunyoro was made a subsidiary territory. There were several popular uprisings during the period of Baganda rule (1900-1964), but most central in the struggle was a group called the Mubende Banyoro Committee (MBC). After a post-colonial referendum in 1964 the Banyoro got back political power in two of the disputed "Lost Counties", which make up the present Kibaale District. However, formal ownership of land in the "Lost Counties" has remained, until today, with the now absentee Baganda landlords and the central government. The Baganda rule of the "Lost Counties" represents a loss of prestige, political repression, humiliation and erosion of traditional Banyoro culture. Sometimes Banyoro in Kibaale make a distinction between themselves and other Banyoro because of their "Lost Counties" legacy. They then refer to themselves as the Bagangaizi, and recently many political actors have used the generic expression *abaana enzarwa*. The latter term is an idiom for indigeneity that literally means "the indigenous children". The following section deals with the changing conflict dynamics between the indigenous Banyoro and migrant ethnic groups in Kibaale since the late 1990s.

The genealogy of the current ethnic conflict is disputed, but most Banyoro and Bafuruki agree that it is a relatively new scenario that became apparent in 2001. What they do disagree on is what the conflict is all about. It is therefore pertinent to ask why the conflict arose at this time, and I want to identify three major related factors. First, there has been a large increase in the non-Banyoro population in Kibaale District over recent decades. In 1965, only ten percent in the area were Bafuruki (Beattie 1971), but today the non-Banyoro share of the population is likely to be more than fifty percent (Namyaka 2003). Furthermore, the total district population doubled from 1991 to 2002, giving Kibaale the highest net population growth in the country. Why and how did these major demographic changes take place in Kibaale District? They are the result of voluntary migration in combination with official resettlement schemes. The central government has tried to tackle land

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[6] The root term for an ethnic group would be, for example, Nyoro or Kiga. Then prefixes (*Ba, Bu, Mu, Ru*) are generally used to distinguish ethnically defined attributes. In this article I will use the Ba- prefix (Banyoro) exclusively to refer to ethnic identity and Ru- (Runyoro) to identify the vernacular language of that group.

[7] The language of Batoro and Banyoro.

shortages and to control population movement by establishing resettlement schemes in Western Uganda. According to a conservative estimate, more than 30,000 have been resettled in Kibaale District alone (Nsamba-Gayiiya 2003). Many Bafuruki have left the gazetted schemes to avoid fragmentation of land holdings and to acquire more land elsewhere in the district. Furthermore, the resettlement schemes have acted as pull factors on further voluntary migration.

The second factor is that Banyoro politics became more explicitly based on claims to ethnic entitlement based on indigeneity in the 1990s. Then in 2001, the Mubende Banyoro Committee was re-established after thirty-six years of inaction. The MBC argue that the Bagangaizi have remained impoverished since 1900 because of the "Lost Counties" issue. They demand a restitution of the land rights they had lost during the colonial period. Furthermore, they argue that their former loss justifies exclusive rights to land and political representation in the district. The story of the "Lost Counties" is not just about suffering but also resistance against their Baganda adversaries. They claim to have chased away their Baganda adversaries in 1964. This dual notion of suffering and resistance is central to their current political ideology. The MBC dispute the status of Bafuruki migrants from a moral, political and legal perspective, calling them "illegal settlers", "foreigners"[8] or "land grabbers". They have also threatened to chase away the Bafuruki, as they did the Baganda landlords, if they fail to recognise Banyoro domination.

Third, in terms of contestation of ethnic entitlements the government's decentralisation of power and legislative reforms need to be taken into account. There is not enough space to cover the full extent of the broader political context here, but see Espeland (2005b, 2006) for a more detailed discussion. What is clear is that national decentralisation feeds into existing notions of ethnoterritorialism and the contested politics of belonging, prevailing issues in the region and Uganda at large. Since the signing of the 1900 Uganda Agreement, ethnic group entitlements have usually been followed by the dominance of an ethnic group in an area. In turn, district-making has entrenched the popular as well as political perception that certain groups are indigenous, while excluding other ethnic minority groups in the district. Subsequently, physical origin and background matter in terms of political rights in each district.

Kibaale District is now often referred to as the "epicentre" of ethnic indigenous-migrant conflict in region. Despite rising levels of political enmity, most reported land conflicts in 2001 were not inter-ethnic but boundary disputes between relatives (Wilson and Nolan 2001). Furthermore, there were no Banyoro-Bafuruki confrontations until the district elections in 2002. Through the elections, the neologism Bafuruki became an important vehicle for political mobilisation, and ultimately a Bafuruki candidate was elected as the district chairman. The resulting outcry and threats from the MBC and the Banyoro elite made President Museveni remove the elected chairman and install an indigenous Banyoro representative. The much-discussed electoral dispute was followed by further ethnic violence with the land redistribution in 2003. As political situations, the electoral crisis and the land redistribution threw ethnic divisions into sharper relief in Kibaale District. The wider ethnic conflict also had profound impacts on communal relations in Businge.

Businge – village level

Businge was until Black Sunday a small multi-ethnic community where Banyoro and Bafuruki had lived side-by-side as neighbours for decades. With about 70 households, Businge consists of widely dispersed homesteads, some shops and people's cultivated gardens (*shamba*). The heart of the community is a sleepy trading centre located along a tributary dirt road. Businge is in a relatively remote location, or what Ugandans usually refer to as "deep in the villages". The social field in Businge is made up of people from a wide variety of ethnic and religious backgrounds. Today Businge is the village with the highest number of Banyoro residents in the area, but nonetheless they are numerically inferior to their Bafuruki neighbours. Despite the village's apparent

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[8] Especially Bakiga from Southern Uganda are accused of being illegal Rwandese migrants.

tranquillity, it has recently been the topos of violence, destruction and the contestation of ethnic entitlements. I would like to highlight three aspects of village life that are particularly noteworthy in understanding local social relations.

The first relates to ethnicity as one of many social roles in everyday community life. The local Banyoro took control in Businge when the Baganda landlords left in 1964. One of their key concerns was to attract more people to settle in the area. As a consequence, several Bafuruki have come to Businge and settled there permanently since the 1970s. Incorporation into the social environment was symmetrical and did not entail ethnic clientalism for the Bafuruki newcomers. Intermarriage, *okuswererangana*, between Banyoro and Bafuruki became a fairly common way of building social relations, and the practice has persisted until today. There is therefore much interaction in the intimate sphere between intermarried families. The second relates to local conflict dynamics that are relevant in the public as well as the intimate sphere. On the one hand, community life involves greetings and affinal ties, neighbourliness, communal drinking and assistance when someone is ill; on the other; witchcraft accusations, divorce cases and boundary disputes arise that can divide large segments of the community.

Land is the final aspect that I want to highlight. In Businge, as in most parts of Uganda, people talk about their customary land tenure using the term *kibanja*. After the Baganda left, the Banyoro soon took charge of land matters in the village and redistributed land to those who wanted it. As in the rest of Uganda, people seem to have followed largely local strategies of land management amid the political turmoil in the 1970s and 1980s.[9] Banyoro sold parts of their own *kibanja* land to the Bafuruki newcomers and got much treasured capital in return. The nature of and manner by which these land transactions were conducted were relatively unproblematic at the time. In addition to purchase and allotment, people still obtain locally recognised *kibanja* rights by clearing new land in the remote bush or forests.

Most peasants in Businge do not hold any documentary proof of their *kibanja* rights to the land. Considering the broader ethnic conflict, the land rights of Bafuruki migrants have come under persistent pressure from the Banyoro elite. From the institutional perspective of Kibaale District Land Board, dominated by the Banyoro elite, a number of questions arose in the late 1990s. Should informal Bafuruki land acquisitions be termed illegal encroachment or settlement "in good faith"? Who would in that case be allowed to stay and who would have to vacate their land? How would one verify who was a legal settler and who was not? Ultimately, who would make the final decision about land rights in Kibaale District? The 2003 land redistribution brought these contentious issues to a frightening prominence for the Bafuruki peasants in Businge.

3. Black Sunday

On 8 May 2003, the Banyoro chairman of Kibaale District Land Board announced on the district radio station that there would be a major redistribution of public land in the district, starting in Businge Parish. He said that most of the "unused" [sic] in Businge were to be registered, demarcated and given to landless Banyoro with documents of customary tenure. Implicitly this meant that Bafuruki peasants would have to give away much of their *kibanja* land for free and get nothing in return. Given the partiality of entitlements, the local ethnic communities had to take sides in the land redistribution, many against their own will. Social relations in Businge were soon polarised and politicised based on ethnicity. Local Banyoro leaders had to collaborate with the district land board while the immigrant Bafuruki stood firm against the redistribution. Overt Bafuruki resistance increased as the surveying of land progressed. People told me that they clearly recognised that there was a profound breach in inter-ethnic relations in Businge and the surrounding villages. Apart from not greeting each other, the breach was most visibly signalled when Bafuruki armed with spears and machetes patrolled the trading centre in Businge. Several informants told me

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[9] The period between Idi Amin's military coup in 1971 and Yoweri Museveni's violent takeover in 1986.

that all Bafuruki men were forced by their fellows to collaborate against the Banyoro in the land redistribution. They identified one long-time Bafuruki resident in Businge who had been badly caned when he refused to take part in the mobilisation.

After only a few weeks, the land redistribution exercise seemed to have been unsuccessful in Businge because the local Bafuruki population had successfully resisted any surveying of their land. Prior to Black Sunday, there were some official attempts to prevent the situation from turning violent. It is, however, clear that neither social mechanisms nor local leaders, nor the police managed to reconcile the conflicting parties. In fact, most of the politico-administrative leaders on both sides were engaged for or against the land redistribution, and political actors outside the politico-administrative realm were actively taking part in the situation. All the key officials involved in the land redistribution in Businge were Banyoro, from the local council chairman to the district land board. Moreover, the controversial Mubende Banyoro Committee was taking an official lead in the exercise. It was common knowledge at the time that the Banyoro district administration, with the help of the MBC, had already been successful in surveying Bafuruki land for redistribution in other parts of the district in the months prior to Black Sunday. The MBC secretary made no secret of their strategy in the land redistribution. He openly told me that:

> We have moved into the villages and acquired our land, and where Bakiga were we told them to move away. (…) We said: if you are going to complain, we are going to send you away. And they accepted. (…) Banyoro were distributing the land of the Bakiga who came and settled there illegally. So we chased them away, and that was a clash. (Interview: July 2004)

Despite the harsh rhetoric and forceful evictions by the MBC, there were no major Bafuruki uprisings against the land redistribution in other parts of Kibaale District. In Businge, most people went about their usual business despite the tense atmosphere.

The morning of 25 May 2003 started out like any ordinary Sunday. The village got busy around noon, and people from different ethnic backgrounds and creeds came to pray or pass time with friends and neighbours. After religious service, many got together in the trading centre to chat, exchange gossip and buy some food or local brew. However, on this day several Bafuruki had gathered at the local primary school just outside the trading centre. The number of people cited by my informants ranges from around 100 to 2000. Some Bafuruki were armed with spears and machetes, as they had been during the preceding two weeks. Nevertheless, most people still went to church or carried out their usual business in the trading centre. My main Banyoro informant Yozefu told me that in the morning of Black Sunday a young man came from afar and spread rumours that "turned around" his Bafuruki acquaintances in the village. These rumours claimed that the Banyoro were going to attack Businge later that day and "finish off" those Bafuruki who were resisting the land redistribution. At some stage in the afternoon, a crowd of local Bafuruki men came from the school and attacked unarmed Banyoro villagers in the trading centre. Most of the Banyoro managed to flee, but among those who did not was an elderly woman called Mukaikuru. She was at home after church, and her adult son was close by in the village centre. Mukaikuru told me that local Bafuruki men attacked her along with her grandchildren. They decapitated the children with machetes and hacked her until she fainted. They probably thought she was dead. When she woke up Mukaikuru managed to hide at the local clinic until the police arrived at around midnight. Her neighbour Yozefu was at his shop in the trading centre when the violence broke out. He told me a similar story to that of Mukaikuru:

> At around ten I saw people coming with machetes as they had done before. I thought it was like it had been in the past. All the people went to services and prayers and came back. They did not buy much that day, and I could see the number of people increasing at the school. Around two o'clock several men came to my bar, greeting

me *'agandi'*. I replied *'ni gye'*.[10] Then two men came into the building. They cut[11] the tables in my bar [with machetes] and said I should get out immediately. Someone tried to cut me on the side when I went outside the door. The one who tried to cut was the catechist of [nearby village]. I tried to run, but another man called […] came and cut me on the arm. When I tried to continue, a man called […], chairman of [nearby village] cut me on the right arm. I tried to ask why I was cut. After asking, another man called […] came and cut me on top of the head. That is when I fell down. I took some time lying down, and they thought I had died. When they later saw me running away, a man followed me with a machete with the intention of finishing me off. Many people tried to follow, and they wanted to kill me. (…) They did not see me. (Conversation: May 2004)

Yozefu made a narrow escape from the crowd and managed hide in his banana gardens until it got dark. Then his brother found him. Later he spent several weeks in hospital before he went back to the village. Mukaikuru's and Yozefu's stories bring out several important aspects of the violence that took place during Black Sunday. Firstly, they both claimed that the attacks came unexpectedly even though the situation was tense. Then their accounts show that the victims knew their attackers, who came from the same locality. They also give an impression of the Bafuruki crowd dynamics. The crowd moved swiftly from the local primary school and attacked without warning. Men Yozefu and Mukaikuru already knew assaulted him in an ostensibly ritualistic manner. The perpetrators carried out the violence within a relatively short time span. Then they went on a rampage in the trading centre and nearby homesteads. Finally, their accounts show that the violence was visible to all as it happened in the busy trading centre on a Sunday afternoon.

Some of the houses and shops belonging to Banyoro were looted and burnt shortly after the killings. According to all sources a battle ensued with a group of Banyoro men who came from "outside" around the time of the local bloodshed. After a few hours, the fighting ended and the village appeared empty. The Bafuruki also fled the village and hid in the surrounding bush. There were no obvious local attempts to conceal the fact that the violence had taken place, and the police found the victims where they had been killed. The police told me that they managed to negotiate a truce so that they could secure the village from further attack and investigate what had taken place. Many people in surrounding villages fled into the bush when the violence broke out, and they remained there until at least the following day. Some did not sleep in their houses for weeks and others even refused to send their children back to school. Most of all, people talked about the fear and uncertainty that followed the event, attempted revenge, and worries for the lives of their children. However, once the police had secured Businge, there were no further collective acts of violence in the area.

4. Why did neighbours become killers?

We had to fight!

> How a radical land distribution may be carried out without causing violence or actually worsening distribution remains a mystery.[12]

The importance of land in rural Uganda cannot be underestimated. From an instrumental perspective, it is obvious that the land redistribution caused serious conflict in Businge and the

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[10] "*Agandi*" is the most common greeting in the Rukiga language. It means "what is the news?" i.e. "how are you?" The reply "*ni gye*" translates to "I am fine".
[11] In this paragraph, "cut" refers to all assaults with a machete.
[12] Parker Shipton (1994: 368).

neighbouring villages, and that the conflict process culminated in Black Sunday. Given the brutality of communal violence there is a tendency to privilege the voice of the survivors,[13] and in the case of Black Sunday they were Banyoro. However, as Krohn-Hansen (1994) aptly points out, if we are to understand violence as performance, we must shift our attention to the users of violence.

It is clear that most of the villagers in Businge were, willingly or unwillingly, drawn into the land redistribution that culminated in Black Sunday. The question is, then, who were the Bafuruki perpetrators, and how were they mobilised? The largely male crowd during Black Sunday was a cross-section of the local immigrant community and included ordinary peasants, artisans, traders, local politicians and a catechist.[14] Many of them had been mobilised by a couple of influential Bafuruki men in the vicinity. What united them was the sudden imposition of ethnic difference among neighbours created by the land redistribution. In this section, I will consider the nexus of social, emotional and moral imperatives of Bafuruki mobilisation, rather than their strategic response to the land redistribution.

The Bafuruki in Businge communicated a sense of moral indignation and perceived injustice with the land redistribution. They were both afraid to lose their land and angry with their Banyoro neighbours, whom they accused of siding with the district land board and the MBC. They tended to disclose it through an array of recurring rumours of attempted murder, arson and violent intimidation by Banyoro prior to Black Sunday. Furthermore, they claimed that the land redistribution confirmed their fears about the Banyoros' political agenda. They claimed that on several occasions the MBC had threatened that they could "chase" the Bafuruki immigrants like they had done with their Baganda landlords in 1964. Consequently, the local Bafuruki peasants knew that they could risk losing their land and perhaps their lives too. Many Bafuruki peasants were also enraged when they heard that the district land board referred to the Banyoro beneficiaries as "the indigenous children" and that the land to be redistributed was termed "undeveloped" land, regardless of whether the Bafuruki peasants had locally recognised *kibanja* land rights to it. A Bafuruki local council chairman of a neighbouring village offered me his version of the Bafuruki reaction to the land redistribution:

> We felt threatened and decided to fight if they would come to our area. (…) Only the landowner and no relatives were supposed to be there when they demarcated the land. We could not agree that there would be no witnesses from the village. It angered us that they were going to distribute our land without compensation. (Pause) After all, we bought that land from the very ones who wanted to take it away. The Bafuruki could not just give away their land freely! So, we had to fight! (Conversation: June 2004)

The man's statement emphasises a number of important points. First, he talks of the fear and anger among the Bafuruki over the land redistribution. The stated anger is coupled with a sense of moral outrage against the betrayal of previous ethnic solidarity. Then he justifies the use of force against the Banyoro as self-defence against a violation of fundamental rights. These widely held remarks have, as I will discuss, several implications for the contested legitimacy of the communal violence during Black Sunday.

First, it seems as though the Bafuruki perpetrators were driven by the dialectic of rage and panic that Tambiah (1996) attributes to violent crowds. My preliminary argument is that their rage was primarily moral rather than instrumental, and that the crowd violence unleashed against their Banyoro neighbours was a form of retributive justice in response to the land redistribution. I therefore support Veena Das's observation that violent crowds are "often fighting for the restoration

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[13] Das (1990c, 1995, 2001) is the strongest advocate of a victim-centred approach. Her general stance is to privilege the survivors' voices, and thereby I would argue she also "officialises" the victim's stories. Furthermore, taken to the extreme the approach also misses the complex relationships between suffering and resistance, as well as the values and motivations behind violence as social action.

[14] This observation is based on several witness accounts and police information.

of a moral order" (1990a: 27) through communal violence. Then second, as I will show through the following sections, rumours were the Bafuruki's primary source of information during the land redistribution. These rumours affected the violent crowd's actions in a number of ways.

Between a rock and a hard place

It is clear that the tense conflict situation reached its crisis on 25 May when a group of armed Banyoro men came to harass the resisting Bafuruki peasants in Businge. In a matter of hours, the situation went from an impending violation of customary land rights to a direct threat of violence. One would assume that the proximate cause of the communal violence in Businge was a pre-emptive attack on the collaborating Banyoro in Businge. Making an allowance for David Riches's (1986) instrumentalist leaning, his key concept *tactical pre-emption* can be analytically fruitful for analysing the motivation of the Bafuruki crowd during Black Sunday. Tactical pre-emption means "securing practical advantage over one's opponents in the short term through forestalling their activities" (ibid: 5). Riches argues that the concept best confronts the apparent contradiction between social advancement and meeting a level of legitimacy. The dual notion is of vital importance to the perpetrator in two related instances. Firstly, it is easier to justify violent actions if they are presented as unavoidable. To present the violence as unavoidable it is important to persuade the local audience and outside community of the acceptability of the violent act. Secondly, the immediate effect of tactical pre-emption must be to weaken the enemy's physical abilities for it to be acceptable. When forced to defend their actions, the perpetrators can present the event in a way that makes the idea of practical pre-emption explicit. Here Riches introduces the concept of core purpose to analyse the political relation between perpetrators and unwilling victims and witnesses. The core purpose of violence covers the measures that justify violence in the sense that it represents the legitimacy of violence itself. In short, the core purpose constitutes the substance of violence's legitimacy.[15] Consequently, people's accounts and rumours of Black Sunday are shaped by an a posteriori contestation of its legitimacy. In the following section I will analyse further accounts from local Bafuruki perpetrators and witnesses who live in and around Businge to explore their ambiguous construction of Banyoro targets.

A young Bafuruki shopkeeper who witnessed the violence told me that the local Banyoro had "organised themselves for fighting" that day. Instead of presenting them as passive victims, he labelled them as potential perpetrators. Similarly, the accused Bafuruki perpetrators claimed that the local Banyoro were collaborating with the Mubende Banyoro Committee and had prepared themselves for a fight, and that they had to stop them. Some of the rumours were elusive, but others connected particular people to specific actions. One persistently recurring Bafuruki rumour said that named Banyoro were supposed to have attended secret nightly meetings with the MBC and high-ranking politicians during the 2002 elections and the land redistribution. The meetings were alleged to have been held in Businge and outside the village. Among the people most often mentioned by my Bafuruki informants were the local council chairman, my main informant Yozefu, the local Banyoro catechist and members of the parish land committee. "It is now like it was in the past. A Munyoro is always called a committee member," the Banyoro catechist complained during an interview. He did not want to elaborate the statement, but the local Banyoro catechist also indicates a metonymic relationship between Banyoro and the MBC regardless of whether one is a member or not. Whether direct connections were actually present is in most cases impossible to establish. As continually surfacing accusations, their local truth-value is reified through rumours that seek to establish such connections.

In terms of tactical pre-emption the Bafuruki did to their Banyoro neighbours what they imagined the MBC could do to them and their families. Killing neighbours became a way of

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[15] Riches (1986) is, however, careful to note, although as a brief comment, that the core purpose is one of the many possible aims of violence. In fact he says that it is probably not one of the initiating purposes of violence, it becomes the paramount issue in terms of contested legitimacy.

metonymic signification in a political situation marked by suspense. In Businge, tactical pre-emption meant that instead of killing those they wanted, political actors, the perpetrators ended up killing those they could, neighbours, to stop the land redistribution. The neighbours were therefore seen as legitimate targets. This could explain why the perpetrators showed little or no remorse when they talked about the Banyoro victims of Black Sunday.

Panic rumours and the dynamics of violence

Words travel fast even in rural settings. Veena Das (1998) argues that the appearance of panic-laden rumours is a key characteristic of the crisis phase of a political situation. From the material presented so far it is evident that rumours are infectious and spread quickly in situations of heightened tension and uncertainty, but do "the rumors (...) unsettle the context to an extent that the perpetrators can begin to feel that they were the intended victims" (Das & Kleinman 2001:17)? Hence, were the Banyoro women and children arbitrary victims of crowd panic?

I have argued that the representation of the neighbour as a security threat drew clear boundaries between stranger and neighbour, friend and foe, Banyoro and Bafuruki. However, the Bafuruki in Businge were numerically superior to their Banyoro neighbours, yet they attacked people who did not pose an obvious security threat. Evidently, such inversions cannot just be attributed to instrumentalist pre-emption, but must be seen as integral to the suspense of the violent drama. The mounting tension with the land redistribution was also marked by a high degree of uncertainty in Businge and its neighbouring villages. Secret meetings, displays of force, rumours and gossip seem to have contributed to a dual sensation of rage and panic among the Bafuruki crowd. Following the attack on Banyoro in the trading centre, the Bafuruki perpetrators are alleged to have fled the village until the police arrived.

Then the rumours of the redistribution latched onto existing uncertainties and produced new rumours. Witness accounts and post hoc rumours reveal that many of the rumours were structured according to existing understandings of "people from outside", primarily referring to the Mubende Banyoro Committee. One rumour said that a Bafuruki catechist had been killed in another village, and the Banyoro catechist in Businge would be killed in revenge. The catechist claimed that people tried to kill him because of the rumour. Could this and other rumours have affected the selection of targets during Black Sunday? Spencer (1990; 1992) makes two important assertions about crowd morality and violence. First, crowds seem to follow moral imperatives of their own; but second, their violence is often structured according to legitimate targets and appropriate punishments steeped in everyday values which are widely accepted within the community. The appropriate punishment seems to have been the levelling of the Banyoro target's property, and it appears that killing was reserved for those Banyoro men who were (mis)identified as members of the MBC. However, as the crowd action unfolded it seems as if all Banyoro in Businge were treated as the real aggressors in the situation, although there were no causal links between them and the MBC.

So far I have argued that rumours and gossip play a vital part in the formation of a local moral imagination as well as in shaping the development of social processes. I have analysed the rumour processes related to the male Banyoro victims, and have argued that Bafuruki legitimised their death in idioms of externality, particularly as members of MBC. In the case of Black Sunday, several post hoc rumours also tried to explain the violence against the Banyoro in terms of a witchcraft idiom. One district official openly joked that "people had tried to finish off a witch and a thief in the chaos during that day!" Later I came across several similar rumours in which the Bafuruki talked about the people who were killed in the event. One persistent witchcraft rumour was about the female victim Mukaikuru. She was an elderly woman who had been a traditional birth attendant before the land redistribution. The rumour said that she had killed Bafuruki foetuses and infants with magical herbs, and therefore she was a witch and a potential threat to others. They claimed that because she was a witch, the violence against her was also legitimate.

As in most societies, killing women and children is usually seen as an illegitimate use of force in Uganda going against fundamental cultural norms. However, in some cases it is actually

regarded as the legitimate course of action. In Western Uganda, this is often the case when the victim is identified as a witch or thief (Beattie 1963; Behrend 2006; Espeland 2005a). Everyday rumours and gossip about witchcraft emerge when people are suspicious of each other, following unexpected death or when people find a situation hard to deal with. As an idiom witchcraft is, according to Kapferer, always "unambiguously malevolent and death-dealing and highly immoral" (2002:11). Considering Black Sunday, the moral power of everyday witchcraft rumours may therefore have stimulated both the rage and the panic of the perpetrating crowd. The levelling of identified witches therefore signifies retributive justice and a restoration of moral order in the community. Coupled with the ex post facto types of legitimation of the killings, including claims to tactical pre-emption, the women and children in Businge were not arbitrary victims of chaos but a justifiable sacrifice to set matters right between Banyoro and Bafuruki.

The violence was visible to the whole community as it unfolded in the trading centre during daytime. However, referring to Riches's (1986) triangle of violence, Krohn-Hansen (1994) suggests that we should not use the term witness too literally, for by "witness" we often refer to "society" at large. This brings me to the central paradox raised by Black Sunday. It is clear that the Bafuruki perpetrators also communicated, intentionally or unintentionally, a political message by making the local women and children signify the enemy. However, the small number of victims in Businge does not correspond with the massive media attention that Black Sunday received. The events in Businge were of significance to a wider Ugandan audience because it represented, or have been made to represent, a wider "ethnic" conflict between migrants and indigenous groups in Uganda. There is not enough space to discuss this here, but the political implications of Black Sunday are covered in detail elsewhere (Espeland 2005b, 2006). Based on the short-term effects it had on ethnic entitlements in Western Uganda, my argument is that the transformative power of "ethnic" violence amalgamated the effective making of claims with the social production of meaning. This last important point leads me to my final remarks.

Conclusion: ordinary politics and extraordinary events

This paper started out by asking a number of questions about Black Sunday. Why did neighbours become killers, and what was the nature of the event? In response to the questions, I have argued that rather than being irrational and incomprehensible, Black Sunday represented a particular form of meaningful action that I have conceptualised as communal violence. Since the concept is hardly used in African ethnography, I have borrowed heavily from literature on South Asia for my analytical framework.

Why did neighbours become killers? In the different perspectives on violence we can discern two opposing analytical positions on the Bafuruki perpetrators, one that argues that they were largely driven by instrumental concerns and another that stresses the capricious nature of collective violence, including situational rage and panic. They are not separate positions but contingent. Yet, in this paper I have wanted to move beyond Riches's (1986) conflict landscape dominated by calculation, tactics and rational choice mentality to include the important role of rumours, an aspect too often overlooked in conventional analysis of ethnic violence.

Allport and Postman introduced the idea that "no riot ever occurs without rumors to incite, accompany, and intensify the violence" (1947:43). My concluding remarks on rumours and violence are threefold. The first point relates to rumours prior to Black Sunday. I have shown that ethnicised rumours and gossip played a vital part in the formation of a common moral imagination as well as in shaping the development of social processes between Banyoro and Bafuruki. Some of these rumours came to a frightening prominence during Black Sunday. Second, Tambiah's (1996) points on the psychology of rumours and crowd behaviour address my questions on the suddenness and brutality of communal of the Bafuruki violence. Following this line of reasoning, I have argued that they were driven by the dialectics of rage and panic just as much as they were driven by

instrumental concerns. The land redistribution brought ethnic lines of division to a frightening prominence and inscribed ethnic divisions on dead and maimed bodies. As pointed out earlier, the rumours were not simply a response to the heightened conflict but constitutive of it. Moreover, this constitution was conducive to communal violence. In the process, Black Sunday also transformed an old repertoire of legitimate anti-witchcraft action against neighbours into a new political context. This brings me to my third point about rumours and the contested legitimacy of communal violence. I have showed that Bafuruki and Banyoro accounts and rumours of Black Sunday were shaped by an a posteriori contestation of its legitimacy. Bafuruki rumours about the particular Banyoro victims and targets highlighted amoral aspects of the victims' character, such as witchcraft or an MBC connection, that made them legitimate targets for setting matters right in Businge.

In sum, the case of Black Sunday has shown that the causal links between land conflicts and violence are ambiguous rather than axiomatic. Since the late 1990s a polarisation and politicisation of ethnicity in Western Uganda has intensified along formal and informal political lines. The process relates to a complex combination of existing ethnoterritorialism, population growth, re-establishment of the MBC, formalisation of land rights, and electoral politics. Black Sunday linked local social relations and everyday life to wider political struggles over land rights and political representation between indigenous and migrant groups. Black Sunday therefore came to represent a wider "ethnic" struggle between indigenous and migrant ethnic groups in the country. The immediate effect was that the land redistribution was stopped, but the issues in conflict between migrants and indigenous groups in Western Uganda remain unresolved.

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SUMMARY

Across Africa land rights conflicts are escalating between indigenous and migrant ethnic groups. This paper analyses the communal violence that took place in connection with an ethnicised land redistribution in Western Uganda in 2004. The paper specifically employs the term communal violence to analyse a situation where neighbours became killers. Since the concept is rarely used in African ethnography, the paper draws on theoretical developments and empirical contributions concerning communal violence in South Asia. Looking at the wider political context, the paper traces the processes from conflict to communal violence. It argues that rather than being irrational and incomprehensible, communal represented a particular form of meaningful action. It foregrounds the role of rumours to show how when ethnicised they play a vital part in the formation of a common moral imagination as well shaping the direction of social processes between ethnic groups. The paper argues that rumours are not simply a response to ethnic contention but constitutive of it. Moreover, this constitution is productive of communal violence.
This paper is based on fieldwork conducted in Kibaale District, Uganda during the spring of 2003.

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