

# Conclusion

## THE PARTY

The day after the party, our phones started ringing. People were not happy. The assistant pastor at Pastor John's church said that the members of his church who had attended the function claimed we were advocating for the basamize. Jjajja Kasumba felt that he had been attacked by the Pentecostals. "But, of course, we're used to things like that," he added wryly.

Truthfully, we had all been a bit nervous about the party. The clouds were predicting heavy rain, and we were making an attempt to gather people who might not get along. Though they had all struggled with problems with alcohol, they had very different ideas about what should be done to solve them. Nevertheless, we wanted to show our appreciation for the tremendous amount of time people had given us and to recognize those who wanted to be recognized for their contribution to our project. In Uganda, where the social aesthetics of well-being and recognition so often turn on moments of public display (Zoanni 2019), the situation called for a function. And so, we applied for a small grant from the Equity Center at the University of Virginia and, at the end of China's last visit in 2019, we rented a beautiful pavilion on the shore of Lake Victoria. We invited everyone who had contributed to the project in a significant way for a buffet lunch and asked a few whether they would like to share their stories with the assembled group.

Delayed by torrential downpours and muddy roads, people arrived slowly. While they were civil enough with one another, things were clearly tense, especially for the Pentecostals. They were happy to have been invited and looked forward to the opportunity to testify, but also feared that their attendance might expose them to spiritual danger. One refused to eat. Another walked over to the lake to spend some time in prayer. A third expressed his concerns about the writing of a book that would include both his story and the stories of people who had visited basamize.

But even with the palpable tensions, most listened as people came up to the microphone to share their experiences. George, who also works as a professional master of ceremonies for other major functions, handled the job of leading the discussion with great care. Kato, who had stopped drinking after being violently possessed by his mother's ghost (Scherz and Mpanga 2019), encouraged those who were worried to calm down, saying that although he was a Catholic, our book would be a "book of wonders" and that it should include everything, even the stories of the basamize. At the end of the afternoon, one of the waiters who had been serving the lunch requested a chance to speak and came up to the microphone to appreciate those who had spoken and to share his own story of recovery.

In the arguments that played out at the function and in the tense calls that followed over the coming days, the people you have read about on the preceding pages of this book were, at least partly, trying to figure out whether and how it could be possible for a book to include stories told from all these different perspectives. Since personal narratives of the kind being told on the stage that afternoon typically circulate in spiritual tracts—a form of writing that arguably constitutes the most common literary genre in Uganda—it is largely taken for granted that to include a story in a nonfiction book is, at least to some degree, an endorsement of it and its ontological underpinnings. How could we, then, be trying to write a book that was endorsing both spiritual warfare and kusamira, God and the lubaale? Beyond the more complex ontological question of the spiritual problems that might arise from the publication of such a book, wouldn't the book's chapters contradict one another?

### TAKING THINGS SERIOUSLY

The people who attended the party were not alone in these concerns. In recent years, anthropologists have hotly debated the question of how we ought to treat the claims others make about the nature of the world, particularly where these claims differ radically from those held by the anthropologists. Even among scholars who may not be deeply invested in the debates of the ontological turn, the injunction to "take seriously" the claims that others make about the very nature of the world has begun to catch on as a political move, as a way of decolonizing academic practice. Embedded within this call is a claim that earlier scholars were not taking the statements that people made quite seriously enough and that, in this failure, anthropologists were neglecting to consider the ways in which their concepts and politics might be transformed by a more serious engagement with the ontological claims of others (Candea 2011; Holbraad and Pedersen 2017; Archambault 2016; De La Cadena 2010; Holbraad and Viveriros de Castro 2016). While the distinction between talking about how cosmology informs a given person's interpretation of their experience and talking about ontology may seem abstract, it is in fact a deeply political distinction. Such ontological questions are no doubt foundational to the

“highly politicized and intimate battle over who and what has the right to exist” (Langwick 2010, 232). With such thoughts in mind, anthropologists have been trying to think more carefully about the sorts of violations we commit when we exclude various more-than-human beings from the stories we tell and to find ways to bring them back into our texts (Fernando 2017; Mittermaier 2011; Moll 2018; Watts 2013; Povinelli 2015; Todd 2016; Ramberg 2014; Bawaka Country et al. 2016).

When we began talking with people like Semuju and Daniella, we hoped that we would be able to find an approach that could engage with the ontological presence of these intangible persons in their lives and also hoped that these writings might offer a new path forward that would allow us to avoid explaining away their experiences and these beings. Yet, attending to the agency of such beings across a range of sites where people were deeply invested in asserting their ontological commitments over and against the others that we were also exploring proved to be more complicated than we had originally anticipated. To take one person “seriously” seemed to involve contradicting the views of another. Was Kiwanuka a lubaale spirit who merited our care and reverence, a demon to be exorcised, or nothing at all? Further, we found it increasingly impossible to find a way to live in all of these different “worlds” at the same time.

With these tensions pushed to the foreground, we found ourselves oscillating between a desire to “take seriously” the claims people make about the effects of various copresences in their lives by focusing on the agency of these beings and a less radical approach that would focus on the effects of people’s embodied experiences and their interpretations of them. Should we describe the effectiveness of ritual in ways that ignore the possible actions of the divinities and other spirits to whom such rituals might be addressed? Or should we describe those rituals in ways that might include intangible persons as actors whose effects are more than socially or phenomenologically real? Our views on the affordances between these two stances have been shaped by the fact that we are working with people who are both united and fiercely opposed on ontological grounds. While the Pentecostals and basamize who squared off with one another at the party share a permeable or relational model of personhood and subjectivity and an understanding that intangible persons act as powerful causal agents in the world, they stridently disagree with one another about the nature of those beings, about their moral valence, and about the right course of action to take to resolve the problems that they have caused. Working with both groups of people within the same project has shaped the way we think about matters of ontology and has made us more sympathetic to approaches to anthropology that have been cast as insufficiently attentive to the reality of other ways of being in the world.

To be sure, there remains an important gap between arguments that truly unsettle secular ontologies and those that speak only to the affordances and effects of cosmology, interpretation, and experience. Talking about Daniella’s sobriety as an effect of her interpretation of her experience of feeling a heaviness moving up

and out of her and talking about her sobriety as an effect of her having been successfully delivered from a demon are two very different things. Likewise, to talk of Semuju's sobriety as an effect of his engagement with Kiwanuka as a socially real being through the costly assembly of offerings is quite different from talking about his sobriety, and his relapse, as an effect of Kiwanuka's own actions. Yet, while wanting to maintain a sense of these differences, we have ultimately found the gap between these approaches to be difficult, and perhaps even impossible, to bridge without making commitments to one world over and against others.

This is not to say that the push to think with the term ontology does not do real work. It does. It lets the interpretations of our interlocutors breathe and forces all of us to listen to interpretations that we might otherwise have real reasons to want to explain away.<sup>1</sup> And yet, while ontology is good to think with, it pushes us into one of two problematic alternatives when pushed to its logical conclusions. Either we embrace the ontology of our interlocutors, but become unable to attend to the forms of difference excluded by it, or we craft a more inclusive ontology (such as in Bialecki 2017), but accept that it will most likely be foreign to those we study and may also entail certain logical contradictions (Heywood 2012).

Faced with such possibilities, we have found a return to an older, less radical form of anthropology, or at least an embrace of a certain degree of ambiguity, to be the only viable solution in this case. To be clear, we have indeed endeavored to take seriously our friends' experiences and their interpretations of them. We have not attempted to explain them away, but nevertheless, in the end we have posited some combination of experience, interpretation, and the relations between humans as the causal agents, not God or Kiwanuka. Because of this, the interpretations we have offered lie a long way from our interlocutors' own interpretations. In this, there is an unavoidable gap between this book and what Daniella or Semuju would write if this were their book, or what we would write if we were collaborating with them in a way that would embrace their claims about the world and all the exclusions that those claims might entail.