

Insecurity and the Invisible

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Insecurity and the invisible: The challenge of spiritual (in)security

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journals.sagepub.com/home/sdi**Jonathan Fisher** 

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Abstract

The search for security has become an almost permanent feature of the contemporary lived experience and what Brian Massumi has called an ‘operative logic’ for states across the globe. The modern study – and practice – of security has, nonetheless, been largely concerned with the protection, preservation and sustaining of the material, the tangible and the visible. For many people around the world, however, feelings of security also derive from understandings of an individual or community’s relationships with invisible and spiritual forces. Religious devotion and divine protection represent a central plank of security for many, just as fears of divine retribution, demonic possession or witchcraft feature as a central dimension of insecurity for many others. This remains, however, a significant blindspot in much of security studies – and, indeed, often eludes and challenges state authority as much as it intersects with and enhances it. Drawing on fieldwork undertaken in northwestern Uganda, this study reflects critically on the provenance and implications of this blindspot and argues for an expanded understanding of what ‘counts’ as (in)security. In doing so, the article emphasizes the *global* character of spiritual (in)security and the challenges an understanding of (in)security that encompasses this pose to longstanding scholarly and practitioner associations of (in)security with state authority.

Keywords

Human security, insecurity, international security, South Sudan, spiritual insecurity, Uganda

Introduction

What counts as security and, indeed, insecurity?¹ The answer to this question matters. For scholars of critical security studies, and of international relations more broadly, it determines the shape, contours and boundaries of central disciplinary debates and investigations. Beyond the academy, the lives and experiences of millions are determined by how security and insecurity are defined

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– by governments, institutions, organizations and businesses. Security is not simply a descriptive term or a buzzword: it is a *discourse of action*. If something counts as security, whatever framework one uses to establish it to have been so construed, it becomes the concern, or even responsibility, of policymakers and practitioners. Indeed, if something is defined in terms of security, this empowers – discursively and, often, legally – policymakers and practitioners to act.

In the contemporary era, a time of mass state surveillance, constantly updated terror threat levels and nationwide quarantines, insecurity – and the interlinked search for security – has become a permanent condition and, as Brian Massumi (2015) notes, an ‘operative logic’ for states and the powerful across the globe. Efforts to preempt, name, designate, diagnose and control sources of insecurity form part of a broader governmentality whereby sectors, phenomena, processes and peoples become the objects of political domination and intervention once ‘named’ through the language of (in)security (Stern, 2005).

Critical security studies scholars from a range of perspectives have rightly highlighted, in this regard, that the voices of different groups and communities are not reflected equally in scholarly and policy negotiations of (in)security. Feminist security studies and vernacular security studies in particular have emphasized the importance of considering how non-elite and marginalized actors experience and articulate (in)security. These literatures often underscore aspects of (in)security neglected in official articulations and narratives, as well as how state efforts to manage risk and ensure security can, in fact, promote anxiety and insecurity for different groups and communities. In exploring and analysing how state officials and local communities understand (in)security in an African borderland, this study represents, in part, a contribution to our understanding of how (in)security is experienced at the level of the ‘everyday’.

As we outline, however, a vernacular security approach also makes it possible to identify understandings of (in)security that complicate and challenge state efforts to govern (in)security – indeed, to delineate the limits of security as a discourse of action. Specifically, we highlight those instances where (in)security is derived from assurances or fears relating to the spiritual realm – however one understands or defines this. ‘Spiritual insecurity’, to use a term coined by anthropologist Adam Ashforth (1998, 2005), is a source of great concern and distress for many, just as spiritual *security* can provide a sense of peace and safety for even those in the most dire of circumstances. Indeed, for some, the more dire the circumstances, the more significant this dimension of security comes to be.

Discussions of spiritual (in)security nonetheless remain peripheral in contemporary critical security studies scholarship, as well as in policy circles more widely, and a central contribution of this study is, therefore, to problematize this conceptual and empirical neglect. In doing so, we bring critical security studies into dialogue with the work of anthropologists and area studies scholars who have examined aspects of spiritual (in)security – albeit largely without reference to conceptual debates within political science and international relations. We argue, in this regard, for an appreciation of the concept that adopts a locally inflected but, ultimately, global epistemology. As our own fieldwork in northwest Uganda underlines, there is little substantive that distinguishes the nature, affect and intensity of spiritual (in)security experienced in postcolonial societies from that experienced elsewhere in the world. Spiritual (in)security, we maintain, is a global phenomenon and saturates state–society relations even in notionally secular polities.

Exposing this reality allows us to reflect more broadly on the concept and logic of (in)security. The myth of the modern state provides a discourse of action in relation to (in)security with which policymakers, practitioners and, indeed, scholars can readily engage. Spiritual (in)security, however, may be more of a discourse of *inaction* for security practitioners, who find themselves constrained by the contradictions it presents for their understanding of state authority. This ambiguity is profoundly unsettling, we suggest, not only for state actors but also for many scholars.

In advancing these arguments, we draw initially on fieldwork undertaken in northwest Uganda ('West Nile') in 2017–2018 that focused on mapping local discourses and understandings of (in)security in this historically unstable and marginalized region. Within these discourses can be found both fears around spiritual insecurity (notably in relation to forms of witchcraft, but also anxiety around salvation) and confidence derived from spiritual security. We move on, however, to place these findings in a wider, global context, demonstrating that such discourses and sentiments are a significant feature of states and societies across the world, even if they are framed and ordered differently. We argue, therefore, for a comprehensive reconsideration of the place of spiritual (in)security in critical security studies and policy debates, both conceptually and empirically. We conclude by reflecting critically on the hesitancy of scholars, and security practitioners more widely, to move into this epistemological territory. In doing so, we highlight not only the powerful influence of paradigms of modernity but also the profound challenges presented – to scholars and states – when they attempt to engage practically with questions of spiritual (in)security.

(In)security, power and the subaltern

The logic and practice of security in the contemporary era has increasingly rendered insecurity a permanent state of condition, and the – notionally central – search for security an unending mission and *habitus* for states, communities and individuals. The post-9/11 era has seen policymakers and security practitioners move away from a focus on more predictable, tangible, Cold War-style 'threats' to de-bounded, non-linear 'risks' that exist within a deeply unstable universe of degrees of (un)certainly, prediction and premeditation (De Goede, 2008; Massumi, 2015). Risk emanates from possibility and potential – from terrorist attack to global pandemic (Gross, 2016; Kittelsen, 2009) – and enables, indeed from some perspectives compels, state actors to extend their coercive, surveillance and judicial reach deep into the everyday lives of citizens in the name of security. The management of security has become, for some scholars, an intrusive and ever-expanding mode of governance itself (Müller, 2010).

To what extent, though, does the security 'work' of states and the powerful in this regard map onto the concerns and anxieties of populations? Significant work has been undertaken in critical security studies in recent years on the *impact* and *effect* of state security practices. Intersecting with, and influenced by, feminist scholarship and debates on the co-constitution of 'things' and politics, the field since the late 2000s has progressively come to consider (in)security in terms of embodiment, materiality and the ways in which bodily experiences of (in)security are influenced and governed by power structures and the sensory world.

In some cases, this has taken the form of mapping how spatial ordering – particularly in humanitarian and intervention settings – and associated constructed geographies of (in)security produce, overlay and condition lived experiences of (in)security (Lemay-Hébert, 2018; Smirl, 2015). In other cases, scholars have examined how bodies as objects and agents of (in)security in an increasingly interconnected and digital world have taken centre stage (Duffield, 2018). More generally, and drawing on the work of Bruno Latour, among others, scholars such as William Walters (2014: 101) have come to emphasize that 'matter matters' because it is 'capable of enabling and constraining security practices and processes'. Important, and influential, contemporary critical security studies debates in this regard have focused on human enhancement (Howell, 2015), sound and the audialized body, and a 'worldly approach to security' that, *inter alia*, rejects 'anthropomorphism' and embraces a 'new materialist' ontology and ethics (Mitchell, 2014). Work on the performative and productive role of emotions and affect in the negotiation and practice of (in)security also represents an important route into the question of how far '(in)security' as constructed by states speaks to everyday experiences of the phenomenon (Åhäll & Gregory, 2013).

Much of this literature, however, tends to be framed – implicitly, in most cases – around Northern epistemologies, experiences, assumptions and encounters with the state. It also frequently takes the actions and perspectives of state/elite actors and institutions as its principal point of departure, with populations and societies more broadly considered in the round or in their response to the narratives and agendas of the powerful.

Feminist security studies and the emerging field of vernacular security studies offer a more fruitful entry point in this regard. The former has long placed emphasis on analysing how peoples and communities articulate (in)security, along with the discursive and practical strategies they employ in search of security. This has included, *inter alia*, a focus on marginalized – including indigenous – groups and the relationships between (individual and collective) identity formation and (in)security. In particular, the work of scholars such as Maria Stern (2005, 2006) and Justin de Leon (2020) has entailed the situating of such debates on how marginalized communities experience (in)security within epistemological universes otherwise considered primarily by anthropologists and area studies scholars.

The nascent vernacular security studies school has also stressed the mutable and context-specific character of (in)security and the necessity of considering the phenomenon through the eyes, narratives and epistemologies of those whose voices are traditionally ignored in scholarly and policy debates on security (Bubandt, 2005; Jarvis, 2019; Jarvis & Lister, 2013). Part of the appeal of a vernacular security studies framework is exploring notions and experiences of (in)security from a primarily inductive and bottom-up perspective; vernacular security studies seeks to put aside discursive and ontological assumptions and hierarchies and instead to ‘engag[e] security’s subjects in conversation to explore fundamental questions around what security means, how security feels [and] with which values security is associated’ (Jarvis, 2019: 116). Vernacular security studies has often focused its attention on postcolonial spaces – particularly in Africa, Southeast Asia and the Pacific. Its attempt to provide an essentially ‘empty’ framework for exploring the meaning and content of (in)security at the everyday level nonetheless allows for it to be applied across contexts and lifeworlds with greater sensitivity and less risk of anachronism than notionally universalist frameworks such as that of ‘human security’ (Jarvis, 2019; Loffmann & Vaughan-Williams, 2018; Vaughan-Williams & Stevens, 2016).

It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that the small number of critical security studies scholars who have engaged explicitly with experiences of (in)security linked to spiritual encounters and frameworks have been drawn primarily from these two schools (Bubandt, 2005; De Leon, 2020; Stern, 2005, 2006). Critical security studies, in general, has failed to fully consider conceptually or empirically the place of the spiritual in the nature, work and governance of (in)security – reinforcing, consciously or otherwise, post-Enlightenment political theory’s drawing of sharp lines between the spiritual and the temporal, the material and the immaterial, and the ‘rational’ and the ‘superstitious’. Vernacular security studies provides a framework and impetus for unpacking the quality and implications of ‘spiritual (in)security’ – a concept explored further below – in a way that has largely eluded critical security studies to date.

We argue, however, that a considered exploration of spiritual (in)security forces us to reconsider aspects of the vernacular security studies agenda, or at least its implications, as well as broader critical security studies assumptions around the contemporary operation of (in)security across the globe. Within critical security studies, for example, the relationship between spiritual experience and (in)security is explored primarily through the frameworks of vernacular security studies and feminist security studies and focuses on indigenous, marginalized and subaltern voices and communities. This has the – inadvertent – effect, at a disciplinary level, of ordering spiritual (in)security as a non-Western (or even counter-Western) phenomenon and locating it as a concern mainly of the powerless and the colonized/postcolonial. Our analysis underscores how

spiritual (in)security pervades and intersects with the experience and operation of (in)security across registers and politics. Rather than being a subaltern counter-narrative, the language of spiritual (in)security is frequently deployed across the world to capture profoundly ‘modern’ and global challenges – from wealth inequality to disease, resilience and political turmoil.

More generally, spiritual (in)security, as we will demonstrate, challenges contemporary critical security studies presentations of the relationship between (in)security and state power. Far from providing a further mechanism for states to expand their authority into the private sphere, spiritual (in)security more often eludes state oversight – frequently with the collusion of state actors themselves. This is less the result of the notional secularism of many states: as historians such as Michael Saler (2006) have demonstrated, contemporary assumptions around the intrinsic secularism and ‘rationality’ of Euro-American states and societies derive more from a post-Enlightenment political project of differentiation than from a critical appraisal of the nature of contemporary ‘modernity’. Instead, it derives from the acute challenges states face in responding to spiritual (in)security concerns – challenges that often present as pressures to reconcile the irreconcilable. Examining the operation and implications of spiritual (in)security therefore points us less towards the political ‘work’ of (in)security and more towards the blurred edges of the concept.

Spiritual (in)security

Spiritual anxieties, experiences, epistemologies and cosmologies have been of tangential concern for most security studies scholars, though echoes can, arguably, be found in broader social science studies focused on disciplinary power and governmentality – from Michel Foucault’s (1982) ‘pastoral power’ to Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello’s (1999) *New Spirit of Capitalism*. The concept of ‘spiritual insecurity’ has been developed most comprehensively in the fields of anthropology, area studies and history – often with particular reference to the occult. Adam Ashforth’s (1998: 62) work in Johannesburg, for example, highlights community manifestations of anxiety regarding insecurity ‘not reducible simply to objective conditions of danger’, focusing on local rumours of an immense, destructive, supernatural snake and the ‘intensity of spiritual insecurity’ these rumours bred. Like other anthropologists who have examined malicious, metaphysical forces described as ‘witchcraft’ or ‘sorcery’, Ashforth (1998, 2005) links these discourses to material concerns and contexts, in particular the poverty and violence experienced on an everyday basis by most of his respondents.

Similarly, the work of Peter Geschiere (1995) and John and Jean Comaroff (1993) examines occult discourses in Cameroon and South Africa, respectively, and their intersection with communities’ anxieties regarding modernity, technological change, and the unequal and destructive impact of capitalism. Other important work has been undertaken on the linkages between spiritual (in)security and development projects (Murrey, 2015; West, 2005), disease (Allen & Reid, 2015), mobility (Ciekawy & Geschiere, 1998), popular justice (Verweijen, 2015) and intimacy (Geschiere, 2013). Historians of Africa have also explored the spiritual dimensions of armed conflicts in states such as Uganda (Finnström, 2008) and Zimbabwe (Kriger, 1992). Bringing these debates into dialogue with critical security studies opens up room to challenge and expand our understandings of the nature and operation of (in)security more broadly.

Before outlining our methodological approach to doing so, however, it is important to provide some clarity on how we understand both spiritual (in)security as a concept and a variety of terms that link to it. To do so, we delve further into the anthropological literature. Ashforth describes ‘spiritual insecurity’ – and, by implication, ‘spiritual security’ – as ‘modes of understanding the action of invisible forces and beings upon the fortunes and misfortunes of everyday life’ (Ashforth, 1998: 39). Likewise, Harry West characterizes spiritual (in)security as being derived from

successful or failed efforts by different actors to govern and control the ‘invisible realm’ (West, 2005). Such a definition is not without its challenges – harmful forces such as viruses and radiation are, after all, invisible to the naked eye also – which is why the term ‘spiritual’ is also needed to define the particular understandings of invisible harm or protection with which we are concerned.

The concept of invisibility is also potentially misleading since it implies an immaterial or other-worldly phenomenon. In reality, spiritual (in)security is often an intensely corporeal, physical and bodily experience. Consider, for example, demonic possession or witchcraft – commonly described in terms of bodily invasion and exorcised through the deployment of sacred objects and substances; or religious devotion and divine favour, sometimes believed to manifest in economic success or in healing powers passed on by evangelical preachers through physical touch – often in front of huge audiences; or, indeed, the Christian Eucharist ceremony that provides a regular sense of spiritual security for over one billion Roman Catholics in the contemporary world and rests on the doctrine of transubstantiation. This is not to say, of course, that those experiencing (in)security through these processes and phenomena understand them purely in terms of materiality and the body. Spiritual (in)security can perhaps best be differentiated from other forms of (in)security with regard to materiality in that the ultimate source of comfort or fear *derives* its perceived power from the transcendental and metaphysical – something invisible to at least the majority of humankind.

Moreover, an understanding of spiritual (in)security such as ours, which reflects upon core features of the world’s most prominent faiths – from divine protection to demonic threat – also runs the risk of conflating the spiritual with the religious, or of defining spiritual (in)security as equivalent to particular belief systems or cosmologies. There has been an extensive and ultimately inconclusive debate within anthropology on the disaggregation of ‘religion’ from occult phenomena such as witchcraft (or *sorcellerie* in French). One approach taken by scholars such as West (2005) has been to eschew English-language terms for the latter altogether and to opt for local language terms. An alternative approach – favoured by scholars such as Terence Ranger (2007) – involves the delineation of clear distinctions between ‘religion’, ‘witchcraft’ and ‘other occult practices’.

Both approaches are nonetheless rather unsatisfactory – primarily because, as Geschiere (2013: 10) argues, the ‘very strength’ of spiritual phenomena such as witchcraft is that they defy ‘all classification and distinction . . . the diffuseness of the discourse seems to be the secret of its power’. During our own fieldwork in West Nile, we encountered numerous terms – in English, Madi, Lugbara and Kakwa/Kuku – deployed to describe occult practices, many of which not only were comparable but in fact were used to explain *the same* incidents and episodes. Moreover, as we discuss below, for many of those we spoke with, witchcraft and healing practices often sit alongside and in relation to Christian or Muslim belief systems; they are rarely, if ever, based in separate understandings of the spiritual world.

Indeed, even attempting to define a term such as ‘witchcraft’ is fraught with challenges, not least because of the risks of generalizing, de-contextualizing or exoticizing. More pertinently, though, it is unclear whether providing a clear definition actually helps us to get any closer to an understanding of how the phenomenon is experienced and conceptualized by those who fear it. We therefore follow Geschiere in using a ‘loose terminology that can do . . . justice to the constant shifts and ambiguities of the central notions’ (Geschiere, 2013: 10) and, indeed, conceptualizing witchcraft (and other occult phenomena) as something that ‘grafts onto’ existing frameworks, cleavages and anxieties – rather than being distinct and definable in isolation (Geschiere, 2018).

On ‘spiritual’ more broadly, we take a similarly loose conceptual approach in an effort to capture a set of experiences that in many respects transcend the scope for scientific precision. For the spiritual is, ultimately, neither fully visible nor invisible, and neither fully material nor immaterial. Its ontologies encompass the existence of powerful forces – malign and/or benign – that cannot be wholly perceived or controlled, and that can profoundly influence a person’s life, death and

afterlife. These forces act in the temporal realm – often with visible effect and consequence – but remain, ultimately, invisible to most.

Methodological approach

Having outlined how we understand the concept and significance of spiritual (in)security, in the remainder of this study we will explore in greater depth how the phenomenon operates in reality, along with the conceptual and practical challenges it poses to security practitioners and scholars. We take as our point of departure a case study from the West Nile region of northwest Uganda and fieldwork undertaken there by the authors between 2017 and 2018. The aim of this research had been to compare and contrast ‘official’ articulations of security threats – particularly from national- and district-level state officials – with everyday understandings expressed by a range of people, from domestic workers to magistrates, at the local level. We were especially interested, in this regard, in articulations of spiritual (in)security.

Seventy interviews were conducted in two districts (Arua and Moyo) – including in two South Sudanese refugee settlements – with interviewees being asked to reflect initially in general terms on their current and past experiences of (in)security.² Because of the sensitive – and, in some cases, personal – content of these discussions, we agreed to cite interviewees’ reflections on an anonymous basis, albeit including some basic information about occupations and location.³

Our methodological, normative and epistemological approach to the research was strongly informed by vernacular security studies and focused around providing a space in which those we interviewed could ‘speak (in)security’ from their own perspectives. The precise questions we asked varied somewhat according to the person and their situation but were as open as possible, centring around the following: *What are the main things that worry you? What makes you feel most safe and secure? Thinking about your lifetime, when have you felt most safe/least safe, and why?* In some cases, people raised concerns at this point around witchcraft and spiritual (in)security more generally. Where they did not, we followed up, in most cases, with a specific question around whether these were also issues that worried them, in order to drill deeper down into experiences and understandings of spiritual (in)security.

We were conscious that the latter approach ran the risk of leading some of our interlocutors down a particular discursive and epistemological route, departing, somewhat, from a vernacular security studies approach and philosophy. We were nonetheless mindful of the broader politics of the research encounter and the impact that this would likely have on the relative openness of those we spoke with. A candid and personal discussion of past and present experiences of (in)security relies on a degree of trust and intimacy that we, as visiting foreign researchers, were unable to generate, even with the presence of a locally based research assistant.

Moreover, we could not assume – within the context of the interview – that reflections of what ‘counts as security’ for our interlocutors would not replicate and reproduce some of the same categorizations and implicit assumptions that underlie security studies’ approach to the spiritual dimensions of (in)security to date. It would perhaps not have occurred to many that concerns around witchcraft, for example, fell within the remit of what we, as British researchers, defined as (in)security. As we note below, official narratives on security (from state and humanitarian actors) in this region have tended to focus heavily around more ‘traditional’ understandings of the concept – notably insurgency, arms proliferation and refugee flows. Indeed, most assumed that we would not believe in the existence of witchcraft, with one retired civil servant arguing that ‘the whites don’t know what poison is . . . the African witchcraft is not what the whites understand’ (Interview 1). We also needed to be aware that our self-representation as researchers based at UK universities – critical for ethical reasons – might lead to a further reinforcement of epistemological

dividing lines on the part of those we spoke with. Many of those with a formal education, for example, intimated that fears around the occult existed primarily among rural or uneducated communities, which suggested that raising such an issue independently as a concern with foreign scholars might be a taboo, since it might betray a notional lack of sophistication or education. Finally, and as we note below, for *some* a belief in the occult sits uncomfortably alongside Christian – or Muslim – devotion, and, therefore, introducing it as an area of insecurity, particularly with outsiders, may be considered unwise.

There is extensive evidence of concerns about witchcraft leading to witch-hunts, killings and ‘evictions’ documented in this region since the colonial period and up to the present (Allen & Reid, 2015; Leonardi, 2007; Middleton, 1963; Storer et al., 2017). It was important, then, for us to balance a vernacular security studies approach against a pragmatic awareness of both our own positionality and the positionalities of those we spoke with – which required us to ask specifically about experiences of spiritual (in)security in some cases. The appropriateness of our approach, in this regard, was demonstrated by the fact that, when prompted, almost every interviewee drew attention to such issues – either to provide examples from their own or their communities’ experiences or to acknowledge the issue as a wider regional concern, even if one that they did not share.

The West Nile region was selected as a case study because of its longstanding history as a site of conflict and insecurity. Located at Uganda’s border with South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), West Nile experienced a range of insurgencies – most launched from, and sustained by, neighbouring states – during the 1980s and 1990s, but has also, more recently, become a central place of refuge for communities fleeing civil war in South Sudan (Leopold, 2005). This complex history of war, counterinsurgency, porous borders and mobility provides a fertile context for examining how state discourses of (in)security intersect with the ‘everyday’ discourses of communities and citizens, including those speaking to spiritual concerns.

Our case study therefore focuses on the dynamics of spiritual and broader forms of (in)security in an African borderland – natural for two scholars whose research has long centred around understanding and exploring the history and politics of East Africa. Much of the anthropological literature on spiritual (in)security – and witchcraft in particular – as noted above, equally examines African societies and polities or, in some cases, other postcolonial states, notably Papua New Guinea and Melanesia more generally (Forsyth & Eves, 2015). Vernacular security studies has also focused in particular on examples from the Indo-Pacific region and Africa.

There is a risk, however, that a discussion of spiritual (in)security built solely around the frameworks, examples and contributions of vernacular security studies might ultimately (and inadvertently) contribute to binary views of the world. Unqualified discussions of witchcraft and the occult in Africa, for example, have the potential to evoke colonial and neocolonial clichés and knowledge hierarchies around a ‘rational’ North and a ‘superstitious’ South. Such dichotomies represent a teleology rooted in erroneous Euro-American assumptions that modernity would herald the triumph of rationality over magic and superstition – what Jason Josephson Storm (2017) calls ‘the myth of disenchantment’.

The next section demonstrates the promiscuity between discourses of spiritual (in)security and other (in)security concerns that feature more prominently in critical security studies and security practitioner discourses in the specific case of West Nile. A historical and comparative contextualization of spiritual (in)security – which follows the West Nile discussion – nonetheless demonstrates how it has long been, and remains, a global issue, even if it takes locally and regionally inflected forms. In many cases, it is also far from being purely a concern of the marginalized or those living in precarious circumstances. Not infrequently, it is marshalled, deployed and governed

by society's most powerful actors and institutions – from the British Department of Health to the White House – albeit often with deep-seated ambiguity.

Spiritual (in)security in West Nile

West Nile has traditionally been represented as a region of precarity and instability. A territory that (at least in part) changed hands between three colonial powers in the final years of the 19th century, West Nile's political historiography has been dominated by accounts of insecurity, violence and cross-border threats (Leopold, 2005). Such representations have both reflected and perpetuated the region's economic marginalization under colonial governments as a source of labour and military recruitment. In the contemporary era, the region has become particularly prominent as the site of mass refugee movement and resettlement. Since the 2013 outbreak of civil war in South Sudan, over one million South Sudanese refugees have fled to West Nile. In 2018, Uganda became the world's second-largest refugee-hosting country, and West Nile the host of the world's largest refugee settlement.

Our interviews were carried out in two of the most populated of West Nile's eight districts, in both towns and villages (including the region's largest town, Arua), and in regions near to two international borders, namely those with the DRC and South Sudan. When asked to reflect initially on the main safety and security challenges faced by communities, state security and international humanitarian relief personnel placed considerable emphasis on more 'traditional', state-centric narratives of (in)security, focusing on the porosity of the border and the movement of guns, criminals and rebels across it. One Ugandan NGO official working for an international agency, for example, argued that 'this is a frontline region' in relation to South Sudanese rebel activity (Interview 2). Similarly, a district councillor in Moyo contended that

'the major threats of security are basically two. One, that these communities like these we are hosting now are mostly come from South Sudan, where there's been a lot of lawlessness. . . . The second threat is the state of insecurity in South Sudan. While we are seated here it is barely eight kilometres to the border' (Interview 3).

A central government official seconded to the region even emphasized that 'the border and the gun is the issue I pay attention to' (Interview 5).

Such concerns were also raised in some interviews with state actors working at lower levels, as well as with community leaders, refugees and citizens in general. For most of these, however, insecurity derived primarily from more quotidian sources – particularly from poverty, land conflict (and, therefore, threats to their livelihoods), criminality and disease. 'People worry concerning sickness', noted one village-level councillor. 'We have the issue of HIV, this is the most worrying issue. And issues of malaria' (Interview 6). HIV, malaria and cancer were highlighted as being particularly frightening by some because, beyond their high mortality rates, they were considered to be relatively recent and poorly understood maladies – 'untreatable diseases' (Interview 7). Sudden and/or unexplained deaths were also cited as a cause of major insecurity (Interview 8). Indeed, cutting across many accounts of insecurity was anxiety concerning unpredictability and precarity, as well as a sense that things that had previously operated according to a commonly understood and manageable pattern of behaviour were now in disturbing and destabilizing flux. 'Weather change worries me a lot', noted one schoolteacher (Interview 9).

The erosion of traditional approaches to land ownership and access – and increasing disputes within and between communities and families over both – was similarly cited by most as a major source of anxiety, and a break with past practice and norms (Interviews 1 and 10). Pressures on land

were seen to be exacerbated by the growing refugee population: 'Land is fragmented because of the refugees', claimed one mid-level councillor. 'Land is like hot cakes now, and people are fighting over land' (Interview 11). 'One of the hottest [security] issues', noted a local radio presenter in Arua, 'is land. As the population grows, there is a takeover of land' (Interview 12). Naturally, such concerns were even more acute for refugees themselves, for whom the lack of secure land rights in Uganda has been a recurrent marker of their lack of citizenship there (Interview 13).

Most accounts of insecurity encompassed multiple areas of anxiety and unease, often woven together into narratives of growing unpredictability and precarity. As one village elder noted, for example: 'The issues are a bit many. There are high levels of poverty in the community, even there is famine' (Interview 15). A local councillor pointed to food security, while a mother worried about the high monetary costs of medical treatment if her family suffered illness (Interviews 3 and 16).

A significant number also conveyed their experiences and anxieties around security through narratives of spiritual threat and unease. That is to say, as many of the anthropologists cited above have observed elsewhere, narratives and discourses of temporal insecurity intermingled with those of spiritual insecurity. 'Sudden death', for example, was highlighted by one person – a cleaner – as her 'main fear', the cause of which she argued was 'evil spirits that disturb people in their home' (Interview 8). This was not, however, an abstract fear operating within an epistemology different from that held by others who cited anxieties over precarity and unpredictability. Indeed, as was the case with most of those who spoke to spiritual themes, the two discourses fed into one another. 'Evil spirits were there before [i.e. in the past]', the young lady acknowledged, 'but now there is the issue of riches – people sacrifice others to get rich', she noted, situating her concerns within broader societal unease around inequality, urbanization and the destructive dimensions of capitalism. Similarly, one village elder pointed to the preponderance of 'witch doctors'⁴ . . . causing fear among many people', asserting that 'this [witchcraft] is so common . . . mostly because of earning and people becoming jealous' (Interview 17).

Indeed, discourses of spiritual insecurity helped to frame articulations of fear and anxiety across a whole range of issues, from disease to land and from refugee movement to sexual infidelity. 'Someone with HIV feels he has been cursed and goes to a witch doctor', noted one village-level councillor (Interview 18), while one magistrate explained that 'once there is a dispute of land between you and me, somebody will go to a witch doctor so he doesn't continue to litigate, or that person gets sick' (Interview 19). The latter added that 'here, somebody must never fall sick', alluding to a notion expressed in many of our interviews that sudden deaths, especially among younger people, were widely interpreted to be caused by malevolent forces – usually marshalled by an enemy or rival (Interview 20).

It is crucial to make clear, however, that while the spiritual world was referenced by a number of people we spoke with as a source of threat and insecurity, it was equally presented as a source of *security*. The same person who argued that her 'main worry is death by evil spirits', for example, went on to explain that her response to this was to seek 'protect[ion] by believing in God' (Interview 8). A South Sudanese refugee settled in Moyo District explained his brush with death while fleeing into Uganda with a severe chest infection; without access to medical treatment, he turned to God to allay his fears: 'I felt insecure, but I felt God was with me – or I would have died' (Interview 13). Others emphasized being 'born again' as a turning point in their understandings of threat and insecurity, and religious faith as a critical weapon against malicious spiritual attacks: 'I'm a born-again and somebody who is saved, and they say those powers cannot work on our side', recounted one young refugee. 'We are praying in our Church in case demons are there. We pray. We chase it out. There are those powers. We pray for them. We pray all the time. We are chasing away demons' (Interviews 14 and 21). For others, the risk of *not* securing salvation – through a lack of religious

devotion or absence of clear assurances being made manifest before death – weighed heavy as a source of anxiety and insecurity (Interview 9).

In the case of many of our West Nile interlocutors, therefore, experiences of spiritual (in)security are often interwoven with ‘secular’ challenges more frequently explored in critical security studies literature and security practice – from disease and livelihoods to land tenure and identity. They also intermingle with, rather than stand in opposition to, state agendas and institutions. Uganda has laws and legal processes that specifically seek to govern the exercise of malign supernatural power, with one magistrate informing us that he estimates that ‘nearly 50% of cases that come to court you would have someone crying witchcraft’ (Interview 19). State officials, as we discuss below, are also frequently involved in the governance of spiritual insecurity. In West Nile, for example, local councillors often play a significant role in adjudicating witchcraft ‘elections’ and evictions.

The involvement of state officials, as we outline, is by no means straightforward. In part, this derives from challenges in standards of evidence; the magistrate mentioned noting that ‘none of the cases [mentioned] succeeded . . . because of the need for proof beyond reasonable doubt’ (Interview 19). The centrality of state authority for adjudicating witchcraft cases is also deeply ambiguous at the local level, with police attempts to ‘sensitize’ communities around legal means to tackle witchcraft concerns often backfiring because of an intrinsic distrust in the state as an entity that takes such issues seriously. As one police officer in Arua Town noted, ‘we say to communities that mob action [against accused witches] is a crime, but they say that we support the people they call to be a witch!’ (Interview 26). As we highlight in the final part of this study, spiritual (in)security both intersects with and eludes the authority of the state.

Spiritual (in)security as a global phenomenon

West Nile is not, however, by any means unique as a site where (in)security is understood and articulated, at least in part, through a spiritual lens – neither within Uganda, in Africa, nor more broadly. As researchers of East African history and politics, the starting point we took for this study was to gain a fuller understanding of how spiritual (in)security is experienced by different groups in a part of the region we have studied for many years. Yet the spiritual concerns, fears and assurances of those we spoke with do not only reveal locally specific contexts and vocabularies, but also resonate – at the level of affect and experience – with the globally widespread nature and significance of spiritual (in)security, as well as its ambiguous links to state power and authority.

One can highlight, for example, the numerous cases of exorcism conducted by individuals and communities across countries such as the USA in an effort to combat perceived malign, invisible forces. *The Atlantic* magazine reported in December 2018, for example, that the Catholic Archdiocese of Indianapolis alone had received 1700 ‘requests for exorcisms’ in 2018 – ‘by far the most’ it had ever received in a single year (Mariani, 2018). Such cases have also come to international attention in recent years in, for example, Romania, Nicaragua and New Zealand – the latter in relation to a 2007 Māori *mākutu* ‘lifting’ ceremony that resulted in the death (by drowning) of the subject of the exorcism (Baker, 2018; *BBC News*, 2005; Green, 2015; Hyde, 2018; *New York Times*, 2007).

The extent to which these examples speak to wider concerns around spiritual insecurity in the countries concerned is, of course, open to question. Polling and sociological studies do, at least, suggest that over half of the US population believe that demonic possession is possible (Giordan & Possamai, 2018: 1–2). More broadly, though, the 1980s and early 1990s saw an explosion of fears from the UK to Norway and from the USA to Turkey concerning the existence of a vast, covert network of Satanic cults in social service and educational provision engaged in the

abduction, abuse and sacrifice of children (Falkof, 2012: 754; La Fontaine, 1998; Lewis, 2016). This moral panic, since referred to as the ‘Satanic Panic’, captured the fears, anxieties and insecurities of numerous groups, communities and sectors, leading some charities to assert that thousands of children had been sacrificed by demonic cults (La Fontaine, 1998: 1).

Moreover, hundreds of women came to ‘recover’ childhood memories of their own ritualistic abuse at the hands of Satanic cults or covens, leading to lawsuits and an entire industry built around interrogating the existence, or treating the traumatic consequences of, ‘recovered memories’ (Goodwin, 2018). Sociological analyses of this phenomenon have emphasized the linkages between the moral panic around Satanic abuse and societal insecurities and prejudices around different versions of perceived ‘moral decay’, including around evolving societal sexual norms and the decline of Christianity in public life – or, in the case of some white South Africans during this period, fears around transition from white minority rule to majority rule (Falkof, 2012). As in West Nile, a range of insecurity concerns intermingled in these cases, including those linked to spiritual experience. These episodes also underline the continued prominence of fears concerning the malign invisible in the lives of ordinary people and communities in a wide range of different countries.

Articulations of, and appeals to, spiritual *security* are also prominent in public – state – discourse and practice even in polities considered to be de facto or de jure secular in nature. In the USA, for example, it is commonplace for players and supporters to communally pray at the start of a football game, while US presidents have led the nation in prayer on a National Day of Prayer since 1952.⁵ In the UK, senior figures in the established church of the country’s largest territory – the Church of England – have called for, or led, public prayers in moments of crisis, including during the post-2016 Brexit political debate (*Diocese of York*, 2018; Sherwood, 2019). The annual ‘Christmas Message’⁶ of the British monarch – and head of state – is invariably grounded in appeals to prayer and spiritual reflection as a means to tackle the challenges and difficulties of everyday life.

In the contemporary era, such calls and ceremonies often emphasize their inclusivity beyond Christian worshippers (White House, 2019). These remain, however, efforts to unite national communities and peoples around the reassuring promise of spiritual security, and they are premised on a set of assumptions that such appeals will be pertinent and meaningful for those watching or listening. State courts from Frankfurt to Wellington have, in recent years, also presided over cases where they have, by necessity, become entangled with mitigation claims based in spiritual (in)security. In one instance, that relating to the Māori *mākutu* ‘lifting’ ceremony mentioned above, those accused were spared jail terms because of this mitigation.

Beyond the realm of officialdom, the dramatic increase in the numbers of so-called new religious movements in North America and Europe since the 1970s – from Scientology to Wicca and from Kabbalah to Bahá’í – exposes how the spiritual realm is an important source of security for many people even in states espousing rationalism and secularism (Lewis & Tøllefsen, 2016). Indeed, as historians have argued, the notion of a ‘rational’, ‘secular’ Northern modernity is, in the words of Saler, a ‘mythic construct no less enchanted than the myths it sought to overcome’ (Saler, 2006: 696–698; see also Josephson Storm, 2017). Viewed through this lens, spiritual (in)security appears as far from subaltern but, perhaps, hidden in plain sight.

Conclusion: Spiritual (in)security as a discourse of inaction

The myth of the modern, rational-legal state nonetheless helps us to account for the relegation of spiritual (in)security to the realm of the vernacular, the subaltern and the exceptional – and indeed for the broader under-exploration of spiritual (in)security within critical security studies and

security practice. As noted, security is a discourse of action. If an issue or experience is classified as a matter of (in)security, a response is legitimized, and often demanded, particularly from states or other powerful actors. In the contemporary world, states have expanded their authority to surveil, monitor and manage populations in the name of security to an unprecedented degree; we write this article in the midst of a global virus response that has seen a level of control exercised by states over peoples and their movements that would previously have been unimaginable (Chen et al., 2020). Mapping, analysing and critiquing this expansion of security as practice has been, and remains, a central concern and operating framework for much of critical security studies.

Spiritual (in)security nonetheless challenges this practice logic, despite the global character of the phenomenon. What state response might be appropriate in the case of threats to spiritual security? To some extent, the answer to this question goes with the grain of some existing practice in liberal democracies and religiously mixed societies – the acknowledgement and acceptance of the significance and potential of religious institutions and structures in providing a sense of safety and security.

In many respects, though, the relationship between state authority and spiritual (in)security is much more ambiguous, and, often, problematic. In part, this is because ontologies of jurisprudence in many states do not map onto ontologies of spiritual experience. Many states – including Uganda – have laws and legal processes that specifically seek to govern the exercise of, for example, malign supernatural power. In many of these cases, however, the requirement to provide physical evidence that witchcraft has been committed – interrogated under colonial-era jurisprudence – tends to mean that formal trials lead to acquittal (Interview 19).

More generally, the state often appears, for those in the grip of spiritual insecurity, as a somewhat forbidding actor that rejects, or disapproves of, attempts to govern spiritual insecurity. In West Nile, for example, the state was perceived by many of those we spoke with as offering inadequate assistance and oversight in tackling witchcraft cases. Indeed, many suggested that examples of ‘mob justice’ where accused witches have been driven out of their homes, lynched or killed had followed earlier, unsuccessful, local attempts to have community fears of occult practice tackled through the formal machinery of the state (Interview 22).

This is not to say that state officials do not become involved in such cases. Local councillors often play a leading role in witchcraft ‘elections’ and evictions in this region, their authority deriving from an ambiguous mix of their position within the community and their position as a representative of the state (Interview 23; Storer et al., 2017). Even in states whose constitutions and traditions place spiritual debates outside of the state’s legal concern, courts and public inquiries remain a central venue for the adjudication of state power and responsibility in relation to spiritual (in)security. The moral panic around Satanic ritual abuse in the USA and the UK, for example, came to be debated and scrutinized by judges, police, politicians and state agencies, while courts in the USA, Romania, Nicaragua and New Zealand (among others) have made the final pronouncements on the morality of exorcism or Māori lifting rituals that have led to the deaths of those considered to be under demonic attack or possession. The point here is that, across the globe, state interventions around issues of spiritual practice and protection remain much more ambiguous and complex than is often assumed.

In this regard, the spiritual realm can place state authorities in a deeply uncomfortable and challenging position – forced to reconcile realities that are in many respects irreconcilable. Consider, for example, concerns among some in West Nile around witchcraft and spiritual security. For those who feel threatened and fearful, the state should, in their view, be taking action – in the form of legal process, removal of the accused witch(es) from the community and potentially serious punishment (the 1957 Witchcraft Act in Uganda offers imprisonment for life as the ultimate sanction). For others, including the accused, however, witchcraft accusations might represent, at

best, a malicious and false allegation difficult to disprove – or, indeed, simply evidence of an anachronistic and irrelevant superstition. One local administrative official in Moyo, for example, explained why people did not come to his office with cases of witchcraft: ‘if someone alleges that someone is practising witchcraft, the law requires you to produce the evidence, and you know, producing evidence for such is not an easy thing, yes. . . . You know, when somebody comes here, there is nothing much I can do, because we also work using the law’ (Interview 24). In this context, state actors and institutions risk being compromised and delegitimized whatever their approach and action.

That is to say, for non-theocratic states, entanglement with issues of spiritual (in)security presents immense, and possibly irresolvable, challenges vis-a-vis questions of what the state – and, indeed, international humanitarian actors – might want to claim responsibility for. It is little surprise, in this regard, that in one of our discussions of witchcraft accusations within a refugee settlement, officials from one international NGO argued that such issues were ‘basically managed by leaders and elders, and they use, in most cases, their traditional practices with very little involvement with ourselves. If they can solve it among themselves the better’ (Interview 25). Similarly, many of the exorcism cases mentioned above took place clearly – and consciously – outside of the oversight of the state. In a world where state authority is felt profoundly in the lives of many, spiritual (in)security remains an area where officialdom is, to some extent, inclined to stand aloof.

These challenges and tensions perhaps help to place in context why critical security studies, and wider security studies and practice, have largely overlooked spiritual (in)security. Acknowledging the significance of the phenomenon does not simply mean adding yet another aspect to the definition and naming of security in order to generate action. Indeed, spiritual (in)security may be more of a discourse of *inaction* for security practitioners, who frequently find themselves hamstrung by the contradictions and complexities it presents for their understanding of the rational-legal-secular state. ‘Seeing like a state’, in Scott’s (1998) sense, renders the realm of spiritual and occult forces more invisible than ever.

In practice, as we have seen, states have always become entangled in matters of spiritual (in)security. It is, then, in the realm of theory and policy that we see the dominance of the legal-rational-secular state defining the possibilities of action in relation to security. The work of anthropologists, political theorists and intellectual historians demonstrates that this idea of the state – and the wider project of modernity of which it is a part – is as much an imaginary as are the occult forces generating spiritual (in)security around the world. But, unlike the latter, the myth of the modern state provides a discourse of action in relation to security with which policymakers, practitioners and, indeed, scholars can readily engage. Considering spiritual (in)security within the broader pantheon of security challenges thus fundamentally disrupts the dominant epistemology of rational secularism and state legalism. Acknowledging and exploring the significance of the phenomenon may, in fact, mean acknowledging the limits to security as a normatively required ‘solution’ or empirically desirable state. This is profoundly unsettling not only for state actors but also for many scholars.

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Notes

1. This question is taken from the title of a panel sponsored by this journal at the 60th Annual Convention of the International Studies Association, held in Toronto in 2019. The authors are grateful to the panelists for their reflections on some of the questions raised in this article.
2. These questions were developed through discussions with a range of scholars and practitioners who have extensive experience working in the region, held at the University of Birmingham, UK, on 25 November 2016.
3. We are conscious that in taking this approach we, by default, place greater distance between our interviewees and readers, in contrast to the broader intellectual aims of this study, which focus on giving voice to everyday understandings and experiences of (in)security. This is a trade-off we feel is necessary since many interviewees spoke to us on condition of anonymity. We also feel that providing pseudonyms would be inappropriate since it would entail the imposition by external actors of an alternative identity on people with whom we spoke.
4. As noted in the second section, our interviewees made use of a whole range of terms – in both English and indigenous languages – to describe what would generally be called a ‘witch’ in English.
5. The modern version of the Day of Prayer was formalized into law in 1952, though its origins as a state-sanctioned national observance date back to the 18th century.
6. Broadcast on Christmas Day on BBC1, the UK’s oldest and principal – state-funded – television channel.

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2. NGO official (South Sudanese by birth, now based in Uganda), Arua Town, 1 March 2017.
3. District councillor, Moyo District, 24 May 2017.
4. Sub-county chairman, Moyo District, 24 May 2017.
5. Ugandan government official, Moyo District, 24 May 2017.
6. LC1 councillor (lowest-level councillor), Manibe, Arua District, 3 August 2017.
7. Local state security officer, Arivu, Arua District, 5 August 2017.
8. Cleaner, Arua District, 3 March 2017 (conducted in Lugbara, via an interpreter).
9. Teacher, Arua Town, 4 March 2017.
10. LC1 chairman, Moyo District, 24 May 2017.
11. Sub-county councillor, Manibe, Arua District, 3 August 2017.
12. Radio presenter, Arua Town, Arua District, 28 February 2017.
13. South Sudanese teacher and refugee, Moyo District, 29 May 2017.
14. South Sudanese refugee – a teacher and former county councillor, Moyo Town, 29 May 2017.
15. Parish chief and elder, Manibe, Arua District, 3 August 2017.
16. Subsistence farmer, Moyo District, 22 May 2017.
17. Community elder, Arua Town, 9 August 2017.
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19. Magistrate, Arua Town, 2 August 2017.
20. Lawyer, Arua Town, 4 August 2017.
21. South Sudanese refugee representative, Ibakwe Refugee Settlement, Moyo District, 31 May 2017.
22. Community leader, Arua District, 2 March 2017.
23. Village council chairman, Laropi, Moyo District, 22 May 2017.
24. Attorney, Moyo Town, 26 May 2017.
25. International humanitarian organization official, Rhino Camp, Arua District, 7 August 2017.
26. Police officer, Arua Town, 4 August 2017.

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