NEW DEPARTURES IN CHRISTIAN
CONGREGATIONS OF LONG STANDING
THE RISE OF OCCULT POWERS, AIDS AND THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH IN WESTERN UGANDA

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Introduction

When I came to Tooro in western Uganda in 1998, I was more than surprised to find people talking about abali wawantu, man-eaters or cannibals. Women and men from all social classes, in towns as well as in rural areas, complained that cannibals were killing and eating their relatives, friends and neighbours. These cannibals likewise were said to be witches, because they first bewitched their victims so that they died. Then, after the burial, cannibals resurrected the dead not so much to work for them as zombies (cf. Ardener 1970, Fisiy and Geschiere 2001: 241) but to eat them at a sinister banquet with other cannibals. Thus, these cannibals were part of a radicalised witchcraft discourse: whereas witches kill only once, cannibals kill twice, doubling and prolonging the horror of death.

While, in the 1970s, man-eaters were still assumed to be confined to Kijura in Mwenge district, it was said that since the 1980s they had greatly multiplied and spread into other regions. In 1998, I was told that cannibals were everywhere; in some regions where they had become epidemic a sort of ‘internal terror’ (Lonsdale 1992: 355) reigned, a secret war, in which anyone you encountered could be an enemy, prepared to kill and eat you.1

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