



# Not You: Addiction, Relapse, and Release in Uganda

China Scherz<sup>1</sup>  · George Mpanga<sup>1</sup> ·  
Sarah Namirembe<sup>1</sup>

Accepted: 25 April 2021

© The Author(s), under exclusive licence to Springer Science+Business Media, LLC, part of Springer Nature 2021

**Abstract** In recent years, alcohol abuse and dependence have become topics of increasing concern in Uganda, but the chronic relapsing brain disease model of addiction remains only one of many ways of understanding and addressing alcohol-related problems there. For many Ugandan Pentecostals and spirit mediums to be addicted is to be under the control of a being that comes from outside the self. Where these two groups differ, and here they differ strongly, is in regard to the moral valence of these external spirits and what ought to be done about them. This article draws on four years of collaborative ethnographic fieldwork to explore the affordances of these ways of viewing and experiencing addiction and recovery for Ugandans attempting to leave alcohol behind. While the idioms of bondage, dedication, and possession are at times severe, this article argues that they contain within them concepts and practices that point away from models of addiction as a chronic relapsing brain disease and towards the possibility of release.

**Keywords** Addiction · Religion · Christianity · Spirit possession · Uganda

---

Special Issue: This submission is part of the special issue on Being Human in the Age of the Brain: Models of Mind and their Social Effects, being guest edited by Joseph E. Davis and Paul Scherz.

---

✉ China Scherz  
crs4he@virginia.edu

<sup>1</sup> Department of Anthropology, University of Virginia, P.O. Box 40012, Charlottesville, VA 22904-4120, USA

## Introduction

Talk of “demon drink” and addiction as a “slavery from within” was central to Victorian addiction discourse (Valverde 1997). Clinicians in the 1950s complained that their patients misconstrued addiction as an “ego-alien,” a metaphorical “monkey on their back” (Campbell 2007). Such metaphors have remained part of our modern lexicon with talk of “inner demons” and “hungry ghosts” (Mate 2010).

Yet, when Ugandan Pentecostals speak of the pain and suffering of addiction as being caused by a spirit, they are not speaking metaphorically. For them, addictions are not *like* spirit possession, or slavery for that matter, in the sense that one has *metaphorically* lost control of one’s agency to another. To be addicted *is literally* to be under the control of a being that comes from outside the self. The same is true for the Ugandan *basamize* who engage in the forms of spirit mediumship and worship known in Uganda as *kusamira*. Yet, for these *basamize*, the task is not about deliverance but is rather about finding ways to better engage with the spirits by recognizing prior obligations and moving into more productive relationships of reciprocity and mutual care. Yet, despite all their differences, both groups see alcohol-related problems as resulting from the actions of external spiritual forces. Where they differ, and here they differ strongly, is in regard to the moral valence of these external spirits and what ought to be done about them.

These ways of thinking about addiction differ strongly from the current biomedical models of addiction. Since the 1990s, clinicians, policymakers, and members of the public in many countries have increasingly been taught to think of addiction as a chronic relapsing brain disease (CRBD). Under the CRBD model, addictions are understood to be a problem of individual biology that results from the more or less permanent effects of drugs and alcohol on a person’s neural circuitry. This model both diverges from earlier stigmatizing models of addiction centered on an individual’s weakness of will (Valverde 1998) and also replaces earlier clinical attempts to cure addiction through the use of various physical and chemical techniques (Campbell 2007). Importantly, for the purposes of this paper, the CRBD model also casts addictions as problems that can be managed but never cured. And so, while the idea of disease might free a person from the stigma of moralizing models focused on the will, the focus on chronicity certifies that one is consigned to a life of inescapable repetition, and this too may be a heavy burden to bear (Garcia 2010).

While both secular and religious scholars might quietly scoff at the accounts of Ugandan Pentecostals and *basamize*, in this paper, we explore the affordances of these ways of viewing and experiencing addiction and recovery for Ugandans attempting to leave alcohol behind. While the idioms of bondage, dedication, and possession are at times severe, we argue that they contain within them concepts and practices that point away from models of addiction as a chronic relapsing brain disease and towards the possibility of release.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> While anthropologists are not in a position to adjudicate about the reality of God or various other special beings (Orsi 2018), we can think of these spirits as socially and experientially real (Lambek 1981). In so doing, we skirt a series of problematic ontological questions and instead look towards the effects of experiences and interactions in people’s lives.

## Context and Method

While approximately 58 percent of Ugandans claim that they abstain from alcohol entirely, the WHO estimates that those who do drink have an exceptionally high estimated per capita consumption rate of 23.7 L of pure alcohol per year (World Health Organization 2014).<sup>2</sup> For comparison, the estimated per capita consumption rate is 13.3 L among American drinkers and 22.3 among Russian drinkers.

Author 1 and Author 2 began this study in 2015 and Author 3 joined them in 2018. From 2015 to 2019, the team engaged in four years of collaborative ethnographic fieldwork<sup>3</sup> with Ugandans working to leave problematic forms of alcohol use behind. While some people in Uganda have begun to seek care in inpatient rehabilitation centers and Alcoholics Anonymous groups, given the relatively recent introduction of the CRBD model of alcoholism and addiction in Uganda, most people rely on non-biomedical methods when seeking care for problems with alcohol. These therapeutic resources include herbal aversion therapies, engagements with *lubaale* spirits, and forms of deliverance and spiritual warfare practiced in Pentecostal and Charismatic churches. A major portion of our work has been an effort to follow sixteen people who have attempted to stop drinking by using one or more of these therapeutic pathways over the course of several years.<sup>4</sup>

While these therapeutic pathways differ from one another in substantial ways, they all present challenges to the prevailing biomedical model of addiction as a chronic relapsing brain disease and offer alternative modes of understanding the self that can have profound consequences for the forms of life and sociality that can follow an effort to stop drinking. By exploring what forms of life might be possible given other ways of understanding and approaching those problems so often called addictions, we hope to contribute to a reconceptualization of both addiction and recovery. Before moving on to a discussion of these other possibilities, we want to pause for a moment to consider the origins of the CRBD model itself.

## Chronic Relapsing Brain Disease

While carrying forward aspects of a research program that took off in the middle of the twentieth century, the Chronic Relapsing Brain Disease (CRBD) model did not

---

<sup>2</sup> For a comprehensive discussion of the social, political, and economic contexts which shape drinking practices in Uganda see (Scherz et al N.D.)

<sup>3</sup> The majority of the interviews and ethnographic observations were conducted by Author 2 and Author 3, with Author 1 joining the team for a total of twenty-four weeks over the course of four years. During the weeks when Author 1 was unable to be in Uganda, Author 1 reviewed and coded the transcripts and typed fieldnotes using the web-based mixed methods software, Dedoose. During these periods, the team also met over Skype for two to four hours a week to discuss the notes, transcripts, and their plans, progress, and emerging ideas about the shape of the project.

<sup>4</sup> For a more extensive discussion of these therapeutic modalities and their relationship to the broad anthropological literature on spiritual experience, ritual, and healing see (Scherz et al N.D.).

fully coalesce until the 1990s.<sup>5</sup> In his seminal 1997 paper, “Addiction Is a Brain Disease, and It Matters” Alan Leshner, who was at that time the director of the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) in the United States, encapsulated the CRBD model and argued for the urgency of its acceptance by policymakers and the general public, for whom the idea that addiction is “a chronic, relapsing disease of the brain is a totally new concept” (46). In this article, Leshner argues that two decades of neuroscientific and behavioral research have shown that “prolonged drug use causes pervasive changes in brain function that persist long after the individual stops taking the drug,” making the addicted brain “distinctly different from the non-addicted brain” (46). As opposed to earlier models that stigmatized drug users or focused on the need to help people through the period of acute withdrawal, the CRBD model sought to reframe addiction as a chronic illness that could be managed, but rarely cured. Given the long-lasting effects of drug use on “brain metabolic activity, receptor availability, gene expression, and responsiveness to environmental cues,” Leshner argued that successful drug treatment could result in “a significant decrease in drug use and long periods of abstinence, with only occasional relapses,” but that a permanent cessation of compulsive drug-seeking was an unrealistic goal.

Since this time, the CRBD model has been the guiding force in most NIDA-funded addiction research in the United States and has been the model at the center of many landmark articles and special issues. While not as uncontested as NIDA claims (Courtwright 2010), NIDA’s call for broad public acceptance of the CRBD model has spread beyond the pages of scientific journals, with talk of hijacked brains and fluorescent images of fMRI scans flashing across American television screens (Campbell 2007, 2010) and informing the curricula on addiction in American classrooms (Netherland and Hansen 2016). While we do not aim to contest the neuroscience that informs this approach, we do follow the lead of researchers who have explored the harms this model can inflict upon those who have been diagnosed (Garcia 2010; Hammer et al. 2013).

## Higher Powers

A related vision of chronicity has also been circulating in the United States since the 1930s through the work of the mutual aid fellowship Alcoholics Anonymous. Those familiar with Alcoholics Anonymous might at first find that our claims about spiritual experiences and addiction resonate with AA’s long-held position that sobriety can only be achieved through spiritual awakening and engagement with God. Yet, despite Alcoholics Anonymous’ caveat that this “conscious contact with God” was with a God “as we understood him,” the vision of God in AA is actually quite specific and quite different from the role that spiritual forces play in many of the stories that we gathered during our research in Uganda.

---

<sup>5</sup> The idea that addiction might be a more or less permanent condition drew upon an earlier body of work carried out during the mid-twentieth century that sought to develop a cohesive model of addiction. These mid-century researchers differed from their predecessors in their increasing commitment to the idea that addiction might, in some cases, be incurable (Campbell 2007).

The higher power in AA, and the use of the singular is important here, is an always benevolent force whose role is primarily to strengthen the will of the alcoholic who has become “powerless over alcohol” so that he can live a sober life, despite his unchangeable condition of being an alcoholic (Antze 1987; Valverde 1998). While these images of a singular will-strengthening force and the unchangeable nature of addiction are no doubt present in Uganda, they, as a pair, are only one small part of many ways that addictions and higher powers are imagined and engaged. This is particularly true for the Pentecostals and *basamize* involved in our study.

Ugandan Pentecostals and *basamize* attempting to overcome alcohol-related problems are less focused on asking God to help strengthen their wills than they are in using rituals to directly engage with the spiritual beings that are impacting their lives. In the stories of people involved in either spiritual warfare or *kusamira*, we find a model of personhood and agentive action in which people’s actions are influenced by forces that are conceptualized as external and direct. Even more importantly, these influences are also thought to be changeable through prayer and other ritual work, and this opens up a range of possible futures that can be foreclosed in other models of addiction. In short, it is less about making oneself strong enough to overcome a permanently determined state than it is about attempting to deal with the determining spiritual forces directly through ritual means. Or to contrast it with the metaphor of the hijacked brain sometimes found in discussions of the CRBD model, here the brain has been literally, rather than metaphorically, hijacked, and there is something one can do to expel or negotiate with the hijacker.

To provide a sense of how these alternate modes of conceptualizing and engaging with addiction play out, we now turn to the stories of two of the people who have engaged with these ways of understanding and addressing addiction: Daniella and Semuju.

## Daniella

Daniella is an impeccably dressed, well-educated young woman in her early 30s. You can often hear her coming by the click of her high heels and the swish of her full skirts. Daniella also spends most of her time at Pastor John’s church.

Pastor John’s is a large Christian fellowship in one of Kampala’s many suburbs, hosting more than 18,000 congregants on a daily basis. While many people simply come for overnight prayers on Friday evenings or to listen to Pastor John’s teachings during the day, others stay for weeks or even years at a time, placing their suitcases and jerrycans in stacks in the large gathering halls.

Daniella herself spent over two years sleeping at Pastor John’s, after being referred to the church by a friend. When she first arrived, she had come to pray for a visa so that she could start her life over again in another country. At this time, Daniella was drinking very heavily. She had started drinking during her last year of secondary school. She started slowly, but by the time she reached university there was little she felt she could do without first taking a drink of the potent distilled

spirit waragi. She would take it to class. Serve it to her friends. Study while drinking. Discuss while drinking. She was drinking in taxis. At home. Cooking. Washing. She said that she was rarely without a bottle.

Over time, alcohol started to create problems for her and she found that she could not avoid drinking even when she knew she should. She missed job interviews or arrived drunk. Old friends were embarrassed to be seen with her. Her fiancé tried to help her to stop, but he eventually left her, too.

When Daniella arrived at Pastor John's in 2014, she found that the teaching was very different from what she had expected, and she loved the way the pastors taught about forgiveness, anger, desperation, and frustration. Over time, Daniella came to think that even if she did go abroad, she would gain nothing, and so she decided to wait for God to change her, thinking that only then would she get something in her life. She was still drinking at this time, but no one ever sent her away from church. She would come to church drunk to listen to the sermons, and then leave to go back to her drinking. But over time she settled there and began listening to the teaching with more seriousness.

Eventually, in 2015, she decided to follow Pastor John's advice to approach the altar of grace and mercy with boldness, to tell God that she was tired of drinking. In prayer she said, "You know what God, I didn't want to become born again, but I came here. God, my life is a mess because of ABCD. I lost everything because of alcohol. I have discovered that I can't leave it on my own. You say, come to me, you who were weary, and I shall carry the burden for you. I don't want money. I don't want a husband. I want you to change me, to give me a new heart and to put your spirit in me."

Daniella stayed in church and cried to God for ten days, praying and fasting. On the tenth day of this fast, Pastor John was at the pulpit. It was around two in the morning. She had been crying and praying to God to change her, and Pastor John began to speak, addressing no one in particular. He said, "You girl, you are here, and you always feel something is asking you for alcohol and you cannot contain it. You cannot contain it because it is *not you*. It is a spirit. Come up to the pulpit here. I will pray for you, for this is your day."

Even that day, Daniella had been drinking alone at home before coming to church, but she went up and Pastor John prayed for her. The church was full to capacity, but she was not afraid of anyone. Daniella says that as Pastor John prayed, she felt something heavy moving from her toes upwards and it went out of her. On this same day, God also visited her in a dream. In the dream, God came in the form of Pastor John. In the dream, she was very dirty and tired. In the dream, Pastor John looked at her, he did not touch her, but he looked at her and the more he looked at her, the more she became clean. Her clothes began to change too, and she saw herself transforming into a different person. When she woke up, she felt very happy and had no desire to drink. This was three years ago.

Two years after this experience of deliverance, she started serving at the church by voluntarily checking people's bags at the security desk, and this she did diligently for over two months, from Monday to Saturday. After these two months, she was given an opportunity to work on the church radio. While she did not have any training in radio presenting, she was asked to present an early morning program.

In August 2018, Daniella met a man at a church-organized singles gathering and the two married a few months later.

## Semuju

Semuju began drinking when he was fifteen, taking a small bottle to be filled at an informal waragi distillery near his home, lying to the distillers, saying that he had been sent by his father. His uncles advised his father to attend to the *lubaale* spirits<sup>6</sup> that they believed lay behind his drinking, but at the urging of his stepmother, who Semuju believes resented his possible spiritual gifts, his father refused to address the problem.

Semuju ultimately left home and went to live with a distant relative in Kampala. This relative, Jjajja Kasumba, is the leader of a community of people who participate in the form of mediumship and worship known in Uganda as *kusamira*. While Semuju was glad to find a home away from his stepmother, he continued drinking, fighting in bars, and getting fired from every job he found.

One day, while he was riding his bicycle, Semuju got into an accident. During the long period of convalescence that followed the accident, Semuju started questioning himself about his life and where his problems were coming from. He went to Jjajja Kasumba to consult him, and Jjajja Kasumba began to counsel Semuju about his drinking and its possible spiritual causes.

With the help of the *lubaale* spirits who possess him during divinations, Jjajja Kasumba used cowry divination to consult with Semuju's ancestral spirits to discover the source of the problem. The spirits explained that Semuju had two opposing *lubaale* in him, Kiwanuka and Bamweyana. Jjajja Kasumba told Semuju that Kiwanuka is a very good and powerful spirit who does not drink, but that Kiwanuka had sent another spirit, Bamweyana, to make Semuju drink in ways that would ruin his life in order to punish him for his neglect. The spirits said that Semuju must satisfy both Bamweyana, by making an offering of alcohol, and Kiwanuka, by assembling a kit for him including a long white tunic, a piece of bark cloth, a gourd, a stick, and a bag with money. Through these dual efforts, Semuju could effectively be relieved of Bamweyana's negative influences and come into a beneficial relationship with Kiwanuka.

<sup>6</sup> While the term *balubaale* is sometimes translated as ancestors, it refers to something far more complex than the deceased members of a person's own lineage, something closer perhaps to what is sometimes termed 'powers' or *empewo* (literally, winds). The spirits of specific deceased people (s. *muzimu*, p. *mizimu*) may sometimes be addressed in these contexts, but far more common are engagements with other sorts of spirits all of whom can be classed under the general term *balubaale* but who are also referred to by more specific names. Among these are spirits who guard or assist other spirits or who can be sent to do particular kinds of work and are sometimes housed or kept by their owners in horns (s. *ejjembe*, p. *amayembe*), spirits who existed before human beings and who are associated with specific natural places like trees, rocks, or wells, and can come in the form of an animal like a python or leopard or cats or turtle (s. *musambwa*, p. *misambwa*) and a pantheon of other named spirits who are associated with Lake Victoria (s. *lubaale mandwa*, p. *balubaale mandwa*). The same named spirit can also come in different forms, sometimes appearing as a *lubaale mandwa*, and sometimes as a *jjembe*.

After a long delay and many other signs and dreams, Semuju eventually relented and followed the instructions that the spirits had given him. He bought the necessary things and began to look for further instructions in his dreams.

Soon after assembling the kit, Semuju stopped drinking, and other things in his life began to change as well. Family members whom he had lost touch with resurfaced in miraculous ways, and he received an offer to work on a lucrative job in South Sudan, managing two trucks delivering agricultural supplies. Before leaving for South Sudan, Semuju left his *lubaale* kit with his best friend, instructing him to keep it well and agreeing to send him a little money each week in exchange for his help.

Things were fine for a while, but one morning the friend that was keeping the kit took the long white tunic out of the bag and put it on. He also took the stick and used it to strike a sheep in Jjajja Kasumba's compound. The sheep died instantly. That same night, Semuju was sleeping with other Ugandans in a tent in Juba when he suddenly woke up craving *tonto*, banana beer. Wondering if something had happened to his kit, Semuju called his wife in Kampala the next morning and told her to bathe with herbs and to check his kit to see if his friend had tampered with it. When she looked, she found that all of the money he had stored in the bag was gone.

Distraught and late to work, Semuju got dressed and went where the trucks were offloading the daily shipment from Kampala. As soon as he arrived, one of the truck owners told him that he did not need him anymore, that he had gotten someone else. Then another called to give him the same news. Semuju was suddenly and inexplicably jobless. He called Jjajja Kasumba for help. When he heard the story, Jjajja Kasumba went and questioned the friend who had been keeping the kit. Upon finding that the friend had indeed tampered with this kit, Jjajja Kasumba chased the friend from the compound.

With no job, Semuju decided to return to Uganda. Before boarding the bus home, he used all of his remaining money to buy waragi, stuffing every pocket of his baggy trousers with plastic tot packs. When he reached Kampala, he was drunk and nearly unconscious. In the week that followed, Semuju drank with abandon. Luckily, someone recognized him passed out on the side of the road one night and carried him back to Jjajja Kasumba's compound. Eventually Semuju was able to reassemble the kit, and once he did, he was able to stop drinking. This was 2012, and since this time he has not had any problems with alcohol. He makes sure to keep the gourds he has left for Bamweyana filled with beer and regularly lights fires for Kiwanuka.

He is also starting to take up the necessary training to become leader of a community of *basamize* himself. From time to time, he drinks a little beer or a little *tonto*, but only during rituals or other offerings, and it never causes him any problems now that he has again settled his problems with Kiwanuka and Bamweyana.

## Not You

For all of their differences, both Daniella and Semuju understood their problems with alcohol to be the result of the workings of agents who were fundamentally other and external to themselves. As in Susan Reynolds Whyte's writings on the ways in which people confront misfortune in a neighboring area of Eastern Uganda, the questions asked and answers sought focus less on the introspective question, "Why me?," than they [do] on the extrospective question, "Who are you?" with the "inquiring gaze focused upon beings outside [the self]" (Whyte 1997, 30). Further, as is also true in Whyte's work, this question was not asked as a matter of abstract curiosity or even regret; instead, it is a question asked in an effort to determine a course of action, in an effort to *do* something about the influence of those others who were impinging on one's life. For while a life may be shaped by the actions of spiritual others, there are concrete things that can be done—either to exorcise the spirit on one hand or to repair and more productively attend to the relationship on the other.

This way of understanding addiction differs substantially from the model put forward by Alcoholics Anonymous and the disease model of addiction with regard to the question of permanence. In both the CRBD model and the Alcoholics Anonymous model, addiction may be framed as something genetic or as something acquired, or some combination of the two, but whatever the cause, it is seen as something permanent. Had Daniella or Semuju made their way to the alcohol and drug unit at the national psychiatric referral hospital or to one of Kampala's newly founded AA groups, they likely would have been taught to see themselves as having a fundamental and unchanging condition (Garcia 2010). They likely would have learned to identify as addicts; they would have learned that they were a particular kind of person (Hacking 1986).

At Pastor John's, Daniella instead came to understand that her drinking was the result of the working of a spirit that could only leave her through prayer, fasting, and commitment to Christ. In learning to see herself in this way, Daniella was coming to an understanding of the influence of spiritual forces in this world that is sometimes known as "spiritual warfare." The particular kind of spiritual warfare practiced at Pastor John's church points towards a view of agency and moral culpability that sees behaviors like problem drinking as being caused by the workings of demons which come from outside the self.<sup>7</sup> While a person's actions might unintentionally create openings for such non-human others to act in their life, or in the lives of other

---

<sup>7</sup> Spiritual warfare discourse points to a radically different view agency and moral responsibility than that indexed in other Christian discourses of sin. For example, in the model of sin that theologians call the penal substitution model, humans are cast as fundamentally sinful beings whose sins would be rightfully punished by God but for the death of Jesus (Robbins and Williams Green 2017; Robbins 2020). In this view, we alone are held responsible (Laidlaw 2013) for our errors and failings. The Christus victor model of atonement commonly found in spiritual warfare discourse, by contrast, attributes sinful actions to the workings of demons which come from outside the self and which can be defeated through ongoing prayer and intercession (Meyer 1999; Gibson 2017; McCloud 2015; Gifford 2004). While some models of sin might attribute a strong sense of moral culpability to the "sinner," to the person themselves, the Christus victor model of atonement found at churches like Pastor John's places the blame on these non-human spiritual others.

people related to that person, these non-human others can cause people to act in ways that quickly exceed their control and culpability. These demons are fundamentally “not me” and practitioners of this form of prayer believe that they can be defeated through ongoing prayer and intercession.

At Jjajja Kasumba’s, Semuju came to understand his drinking as an effect of the actions of the *lubaale* spirit Kiwanuka who sent the *lubaale* spirit Bamweyana to drink through him to punish him for his neglect. While Semuju was bound to Kiwanuka through Kiwanuka’s intergenerational tie to his family, Semuju’s drinking was not his own. It was neither disease nor moral failing but rather was a punishment inflicted upon him by a possessing spirit for his neglect of his spiritual duties. By properly attending to Kiwanuka and Bamweyana, Semuju was freed from a form of drinking which had been inflicted upon him, while at the same time deepening his ties to Kiwanuka with the hope of prospering through his care.

Medical anthropologists have long held that symbols can be manipulated to produce transformative effects. In his 1963 essay “The Effectiveness of Symbols,” the French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss argued that the ritual use of language can both facilitate the expression of psychic states that are otherwise inexpressible and change our relationship to those states and to the tasks at hand. Recounting the use of a therapeutic chant which describes a dangerous quest through a pregnant woman’s body that was deployed by the Cuna of Panama, Levi-Strauss showed how the process of immersing a woman in the midst of a difficult birth in a vivid symbolic landscape could radically alter her relationship to the distress and exhaustion that may be further slowing the birth (Levi-Strauss 1963). As the anthropologist Michael Jackson puts it in his discussion of this essay:

...[T]he expressive value of the spell, which translates lived subjectivity into the objective language of myth, is linked to its instrumental purpose. For in so far as her *experience* of her situation is changed, the woman is better able to overcome the pain, distress, and exhaustion that may be contributing to the difficult birth. It is in this ‘inductive’ property of symbols, says Levi-Strauss - their power to induce or persuade us to think differently about our relationship to a task at hand, or a situation in which we are experiencing great difficulty - that their effectiveness lies, and this process is, moreover, common to both shamanism and psychoanalysis. (Jackson 2005, 84, emphasis in the original)

Further, Jackson goes on to argue, here drawing on both Levi-Strauss and Malinowski, ritual language has its effects not only in the fact that words have been said or a story has been told, but rather that these words are “inextricably linked to the warrant of tradition” (Malinowski 1922, 400, cited in Jackson 2005). “The words uttered are not one’s own but are ancestral words, carrying the voice and presence of those in whose footsteps one walks.” It is in this way that ritual speech becomes “a form of *action* upon the world.” (Severi 1993, cited in Jackson 2005, 84).

For all of their other disagreements, which are too numerous to detail here, anthropologists who have held as diverse viewpoints on the nature of social life and the human being as Malinowski, Levi-Strauss, and Jackson have all agreed that material and non-material symbols can have important effects on people’s

orientations towards their experiences and that these orientations can have profound effects on their experiences and thus also on their actions in the world. In learning to see their illnesses as epiphanies (de Heusch 1981), Semuju and Daniella came to understand their situations and, perhaps most importantly, their capacities for action in a new way. Whether or not sickness is seen as “a demand that the links between men and the spirits should be tightened” or as a sign that one must come to Jesus to be delivered from the spirits, misfortune becomes “the necessary and sufficient condition for the development of communication with the sacred” (de Heusch 1981, 171). In coming to experience illness and misfortune in this way, Daniella and Semuju’s understandings of what they could do to respond to their addictions and what they could expect to come of those actions shifted. While such an interpretation might lead to deadly results in the case of an appendicitis if prayer and ritual were not also accompanied by surgery, we want to argue that in the case of addiction such an understanding might open up radically new pathways for reengaging one’s future.

As we can see in Semuju and Daniella’s stories, this process of repositioning oneself in relation to illness is not an easy one, and it may take months or even years to accomplish. But once embraced and symbolically engaged through ritual speech and action, these understandings of illness can have remarkable effects.

Under the framework discussed above, we can see how Semuju’s ritual engagements with Kiwanuka and Bamweyana transformed his experiences of the world and allowed him to approach the task of living a sober life with a different kind of energy and commitment. Just as the woman Levi-Strauss describes is reoriented towards her struggle with an obstructed birth, so is Semuju reoriented towards his struggle with alcohol. Likewise, in understanding his relapse and the loss of his job as resulting from the destruction of the kit, the restoration of the kit becomes the means through which he can reorient himself towards sobriety once again.

While the actions of a spirit like Kiwanuka or Bamweyana might seem to be entirely beyond our control, the possibilities of influencing these actions through the ritual restoration of the *lubaale* kit offer a method of redress. There is now something to do that might have an effect and in this there is a new kind of hope, a new source for renewed strength.<sup>8</sup>

Further, and perhaps most importantly, where people live in communities that recognize both the not-me-ness of problem drinking and the efficacy of the ritual action, these ways of understanding the self and its capacity for transformation may also create different possibilities for the achievement of well-being through social connections. The fact that the people around Daniella at Pastor John’s saw her as fundamentally separable from the spiritual forces that caused her to drink created important opportunities for building trusting interpersonal relationships. In short,

---

<sup>8</sup> Semuju is also, in an interesting way, both responsible for making the repair and not entirely responsible for its result. It is a mode of redress that is a sacrifice in that the response of Kiwanuka lies beyond him. His positive response is not owed to Semuju as an expected reciprocal gift that he can count on, but it is a possibility, and there is something that Semuju can do to encourage it (Stroken 2010). In this way, that which Semuju is responsible for is clarified and so is that which lies beyond his control (Laidlaw 2013).

the fact that her drinking was seen as having been caused by an agent that was both not-her and separable from her afforded her a unique opportunity to begin again.

This pattern is strikingly different from that found in Uganda's inpatient recovery centers, where didactic trainings and group therapy sessions often foster forms of suspicion that can make truly trusting relationships difficult to achieve. While there are certainly tensions at Pastor John's and Jjajja Kasumba's as well, seeing a person's past actions as authored by another seems to allow people to form different kinds of relationships in the present. Such relationships of trust are further fostered through the creation of a series of opportunities for demonstrating one's reliability and trustworthiness in progressively more public ways, such as Daniella's work at the security desk and at the radio station.

## Conclusion

The findings in this article also point towards the possible effects of engaging with forces experienced as "not me" in other settings, including the United States, where such ideas also have cultural salience. While the Kiganda spirit mediumship practices are not commonly found in the United States, the ideas of deliverance and spiritual warfare being deployed by Ugandan Pentecostals and Charismatics have emerged through a dialog with Christians in the United States. While spirituality and mindfulness have, to some degree, been embraced as potential resources for healing, the models of agency, temporality, and spirituality embraced by people like Semuju and Daniella and practitioners of spiritual warfare in the United States may make some scholars and practitioners uncomfortable. But we want to argue that it is worth sitting with this discomfort long enough to learn what such models mean to those who hold them and what effects they have in their lives.

Anthropologists like Angela Garcia have described the devastating stakes of disease models that seem only to replicate the melancholic chronicity of endless loss in places where life has been shaped by acts of dispossession for generations (Garcia 2010). Through our work in Uganda, we hope to have found a way to build upon her call to seriously consider potentials contained within other modes of living in relation to time, by watching addictions, and their afters, unfold in a world that has not yet been completely colonized by the chronic disease model.

**Funding** This study was funded by the National Science Foundation (grant number 1758472).

## Declarations

**Conflict of Interest** On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

**Ethical approval** All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

**Informed consent** Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

## References

- Antze, Paul  
1987 Symbolic Action in Alcoholics Anonymous. *In* Constructive Drinking: Perspectives on Drink from Anthropology. Mary Douglas, ed., pp. 149–181. London, New York: Routledge.
- Campbell, Nancy  
2007 Discovering Addiction: The Science and Politics of Substance Abuse Research. Ann Arbor, MI: University Michigan Press.
- Campbell, Nancy D  
2010 Toward a Critical Neuroscience of ‘Addiction’. *BioSocieties* 5(1):89–104.
- Courtwright, David  
2010 The NIDA Brain Disease Paradigm: History, Resistance and Spinoffs. *BioSocieties* 5(1):137–147.
- de Heusch, Luc  
1981 *Why Marry Her? Society and Symbolic Structures*. Translated by Janet Lloyd. Cambridge University Press.
- Garcia, Angela  
2010 *The Pastoral Clinic: Addiction and Dispossession Along the Rio Grande*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Gibson, Ian  
2017 *Suffering and Hope: Christianity and Ethics Among the Newars of Bhaktapur*. Kathmandu: Ekta Books.
- Gifford, Paul  
2004 *Ghana’s New Christianity: Pentecostalism in a Globalizing African Economy*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Hacking, Ian  
1986 Making up People. *In* *Reconstructing Individualism*. Thomas C Heller, Morton Sosna, and David E Wellbery, eds., pp. 222–236. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Hammer, Rachel, Molly Dingel, Jenny Ostergren, Brad Partridge, Jennifer McCormick, and Barbara A Koenig  
2013 Addiction: Current Criticism and the Brain Disease Paradigm. *AJOB Neurocience* 4(3):27–32.
- Jackson, Michael  
2005 *Existential Anthropology: Events, Exigencies, and Effects*. New York: Berghahn Books.
- Laidlaw, James  
2013 *The Subject of Virtue: An Anthropology of Ethics and Freedom*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Lambek, Michael  
1981 *Human Spirits: ππ in Mayotte*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Levi-Strauss, Claude  
1963 *Structural Anthropology*, translated by Claire Jacobson and Brooke Schoepf. Basic Books.
- Malinowski, Bronislaw  
1922 *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. London: Routledge.
- Mate, Gabor  
2010 *In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts: Close Encounters with Addiction*. North Atlantic Books.
- McCloud, Sean  
2015 *American Possessions: Fighting Demons in the Contemporary United States*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Meyer, Birgit  
1999 *Translating the Devil: Religion and Modernity among the Ewe in Ghana*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press.
- Netherland, Julie, and Helena Hansen  
2016 The War on Drugs That Wasn’t: Wasted Whiteness, ‘Dirty Doctors’, and Race in Media Coverage of Prescription Opioid Misuse. *Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry* 40(4):664–86.
- Orsi, Robert  
2018 *History and Presence*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

- Robbins, Joel  
2020 *Theology and the Anthropology of Christian Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Robbins, Joel, and Leanne Williams Green  
2017 In What Does Failure Succeed? Conceptions of Sin and the Role of Human Moral Vulnerability in Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity. *In* *Straying from the Straight Path: How Senses of Failure Invigorate Lived Religion*. Daan Beeker and David Kloos, eds., pp. 21–36. New York: Berghahn.
- Scherz, China, George Mpanga, and Sarah Namirembe  
N.D. *Higher Powers: Alcohol and After in Uganda's Capital City*. Manuscript in Preparation.
- Stroeken, Koen  
2010 *Moral Power: The Magic of Witchcraft*. New York, NY: Berghahn Books.
- Valverde, Mariana  
1997 'Slavery from Within': The Invention of Alcoholism and the Question of the Free Will. *Social History* 22(3):251–268.
- Valverde, Mariana  
1998 *Diseases of the Will: Alcohol and the Dilemmas of Freedom*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Whyte, Susan Reynolds  
1997 *Questioning Misfortune*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- World Health Organization  
2014 *Global Status Report on Alcohol and Health*. World Health Organization.

**Publisher's Note** Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.