**Engelke, Matthew,** and **Matt Tomlinson** (eds.): The Limits of Meaning. Case Studies in the Anthropology of Christianity. New York: Berghahn Books, 2006. 239 pp. ISBN 978-1-84545-170-7. Price: $ 75.00

This book is a collection of papers all of which, with the exception of two, were originally presented in a session entitled "Christian Ritual and the Limits of Meaning" at the 2002 meeting of the American Anthropological Association in New Orleans. All such edited volumes of papers will inevitably have their strengths and weaknesses and this, no doubt, is also the case here. The authors, six male and three female, are all Western academics working in Western universities, all except two in the USA, with the exceptions working in the UK and Australia.

It is a given in anthropology and the study of religions today, as the editors make clear in their opening chapter "Meaning, Anthropology, Christianity," that "Christianity is not a stable, singular object" (19) and indeed one speaks increasingly of Christianities in the plural given the great variety of expression of the Christian faith one finds all over the world. This book as the title states is a study of the limits of meaning based on case studies in the anthropology of Christianity. These case studies are drawn from across the world (Sweden, Zimbabwe, Papua New Guinea, Fiji, Samoa, Bolivia, and the USA). They also come from across a representative part of the Christian denominational spectrum (Pentecostalism, Methodism, African Initiated Christianity, Branch Dravidians, and Catholicism). The book examines questions arising in relation to charisma, ritual, nationalism and millenarianism, power and authority, homiletics, conversion, inculturation, and semiotics.

The editors Matt Timlinson and Matthew Engelke justify their concentration on Christianity by noting "the fact that Christians often express a concern with meaning" but also the fact that "debates within the anthropology of religion have raised questions about the extent to which a focus on meaning is itself an approach informed by the history of Christian thought" (1). The starting point for this theoretical chapter is the work of Clifford Geertz and the critique of this by other anthropologists. The authors note that Talcott Parsons and Geertz "have been two of the most important interpreters of Max Weber's interest in the problem of meaning." The problem of meaning is defined by Geertz as the compulsion to create coherent explanations of "bafflement, pain and moral paradox." "It is the process of interpretation writ large: How can humans tolerate chaos, accept the unexplainable, and endure physical and moral torment, without seeking a reason?" For Geertz anthropology is "not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning" (2). This, the authors note, has become a routine position with cultural anthropology over the past several decades.

Talal Asad contests this dominant position, stating that one of Geertz's problems is that like many other anthropologists he is obsessed with the question of meaning, while having little understanding of the place of power and history. He asserts that "Geertz's definition of religion as humanity's attempt to generate ultimate symbolic meanings is, … 'a view that has a specific Christian history' " (3). Meaning has its limits and these can be traced in moments of failure and as Asad, Bloch, and Foucault suggest they can also be found "through attention to discipline, authority, and power" (5).

The authors examine the different "meanings of meaning": meaning as structure in the sense of Lévi-Strauss, meaning as intention, symbolic meaning, and meaning as being, before turning to look at the different ways Christian subjects articulate meaning in the following chapters. They also look at ritual and the limits of meaning noting that "an emphasis on meaning entails the potential of its absence, negation, or irrelevance. In the meaning-saturated world of Christianity, where understanding God's message becomes paramount, meanings *as a result* become slippery in performance" (23). "Meaning" is often an inadequate tool so other tools must be sought. All the chapters in the book look at the question of meanings' limits.

In the concluding chapter of the book, Joel Robbins notes anthropologists' historical aversion to Christianity as a subject of investigation. "[T]hey have tended to find Christian cultural elements rather meaningless – bits of syncretic foam floating on oceans of meaningful traditional culture … or tired routines followed by alienated masses whose real culture, or real hope of finding a meaningful culture, must lie elsewhere" (220f.). Robbins suggests that one of the reasons for the aversion may be that anthropologists recoil from the Christian obsession with meaning – "its compulsiveness, its unwillingness to leave anything unaccounted for, its unrelenting wordiness" (221) before concluding somewhat archly that, in this regard, it may well be much like anthropology itself. This, the claim, "is one of the first [works] … built around the assertion that anthropological studies of Christianity can contribute to questions of general theoretical import, such as the place of meaning and meaninglessness in human cultures" (220). As such it may well be read with some interest by anthropologists striving to overcome their aversion. Patrick Claffey

**Finnström, Sverker:** Living with Bad Surroundings. War, History, and Everyday Moments in Northern Uganda. Durham: Duke University Press, 2008. 288 pp. ISBN 978-0-8223-4191-8. Price: $ 22.95

The author states, "this book explores the various ways Acholi people in northern Uganda struggle to establish control and balance in their daily lives in the midst of civil war, and how they construct meaning and understand the war as they live their humanity – always, however, in intersection with the wider global community. The Acholi homeland has been ravaged by war since 1986" (4). The author's research was carried out intermittently in northern Uganda between 1997 and 2003. It formed the basis for his doctoral dissertation.

Finnström describes the complexity of living in a war zone where there is neither social order nor safety and where even the idea of peace is problematic since

it never lasts long enough to allow the construction of any dependable relations or resources. He assumes that "it is ethnographic fieldwork that puts anthropology on firm empirical ground" (16). Yet it is clear that such data were difficult to secure in contemporary Acholi-land. It was unsafe to reside outside areas protected by the military, and work anywhere was dangerous and conditions unstable. It was never possible to count on anyone or any relationship remaining stable. Given such difficult conditions, even a committed researcher cannot provide conventional ethnography. Finnström alludes to what he regards as ideal ethnography because he wants his reader to grasp that he was unable to do that kind of work in northern Uganda. In any case, that kind of work would not address the problems the people there confront. Earlier anthropological research among the Acholi was undertaken by Frank Girling. His monograph is a competent but ordinary volume. J. P. Crazzolara worked on the Luo, of whom the Acholi are a branch, but his work provides little that would be useful for understanding the issues confronting contemporary Acholi. My former schoolmate at Oxford, Okot p'Bitek, provides many useful insights in his splendid works of Acholi poetry. Finnström makes use of all these sources, but they hardly prepared him for what he encountered in contemporary northern Uganda. Finnström could have collected more fragments of Acholi traditional custom and history, but these would have seemed irrelevant to the dramatic and horrific world he confronted. Finnström listened to what concerned the Acholi he met and that was the issue of survival itself, both as it related to the present and how it could relate to what future Acholi may expect in war-torn Uganda. In this, Finnström followed a cardinal rule of good fieldwork, address those issues that seem of greatest concern to those with whom you live.

Finnström's accounts are inevitably a patchwork of the experiences of Acholi survivors and refugees, his keen impressions of the violence and disorder he encountered, and an analysis of the propaganda, rumors, and stereotypes provided by Acholi themselves, and military groups that attacked Acholi, and the various national and international agencies that have entered Acholi-land to aid or exploit the local population. It is a narrative of violence, flight, loss, resettlement, poverty, misunderstanding, distrust, and disbelief, as well as of hope and survival. Through all the chaos, Acholi have survived and struggled to construct a reality and identity that will help them. After over twenty years of violence there are now over a million displaced persons in northern Uganda, mostly Acholi and people culturally related to them. The Acholi have been caught in a seemingly endless struggle between themselves and the police and army from southern Uganda. Those forces seek revenge for early Acholi attacks on southerners during the President Obote and Idi Amin eras. They are now in northern Uganda to combat the Lord's Resistance Army, a terrorist-rebel group led by the messianic Joseph Kony. The Lord's Army claims to be a freedom-fighting movement aimed to liberate Uganda from the tyranny of past and present governments, but it has continued to raid, loot, and kill Acholi and to abduct thousands of young Acholi into its forces. These recruits, child soldiers, committed horrendous atrocities against other Acholi, sometimes even their own kin and fellow villagers. Reconciliation of Acholi with these young people, many having escaped and attempting to rejoin their people, poses problems for all Acholi.

Unsurprisingly, Acholi-land is rife with rumor, suspicion, and distrust. Acholi view the corrupt and inept national government centered in Uganda's south as no more to be trusted than the terrorists and rebels in the north. These problems have been aggravated by food shortages and widespread HIV/AIDS which cannot be treated due to the unavailable medical services and supplies. Furthermore, Acholi are concerned with the supernatural dangers from the malevolent war-dead, and with the real and imaginary dangers from those living around them, from witchcraft and sorcery as well as physical assault. There has been an increasing concern with traditional and modern forms of healing, spirit mediums, ancestral propitiation, and Christian fundamentalist movements. Besides the dead and suffering, these address the growing disorder between elders and youth and the hostility of men confounded and angry over the new ways orphaned, widowed, and abducted women have eluded male control.

Finnström's picture of contemporary Acholi life is grim, as is his picture of what the future holds for them. Yet he portrays Acholi as tenacious survivors, remarkably resourceful in making use of past traditions as well as new means to manage their lives. Contemporary research could not be a conventional ethnographic account, but it is a readable and absorbing report of a chaotic, difficult, and dangerous part of Africa. It is not enjoyable reading, but I am glad I read it. I recommend it to anyone wanting to understand the problematical side of Africa. It reads more like the writing of a good and thoughtful war correspondent rather than a traditional social scientist. It is what is useful and appropriate for understanding the world of contemporary northern Ugandans whom the author clearly liked and cared about.

T. O. Beidelman

**Fischer, Anja:** Nomaden der Sahara. Handeln in Extremen. Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag, 2008. 191 pp., Abb. ISBN 978-3-496-02805-5. Preis: € 29.90

Zentrales Anliegen dieser interessanten, anregenden und auffällig engagierten Dissertation von Frau Anja Fischer stellt die Dokumentation des in soziale Prinzipien eingebetteten wirtschaftlichen Handelns bzw. der kollektiven Handlungsdynamik einer nomadischen Gruppe der zentralen Sahara dar (22, 23, 58). Behandelt werden die Kel Ahnet, eine kleine Untereinheit der Imouhar (Tuareg; 16). Dabei steht die Arbeit von Frauen, Kindern und Männern nicht als produktives Handeln im Vordergrund, sondern in ihrer identitätsstiftenden Bedeutung für den (einzelnen) Menschen im sozialen Kontext (22). Es ist im Sinne der Wissenserweiterung und der bislang wahrhaft "männerdominierten" Nomadismus-Forschung überaus begrüßenswert, wenn dabei stets den nomadischen Frauen das Hauptaugenmerk gehört.