

Living with the Lord's Resistance Army

Pamela Khanakwa

I am Evelyn Amony: Reclaiming My Life from the Lord's Resistance Army

by Evelyn Amony (with an edited introduction by Erin Baines)
University of Wisconsin Press, 2015, 182 pp., US \$ 26.95,
ISBN: 978-0-299-30494-2

During the period 1986 through the mid-2000s, various rebel movements arose in Acholiland in northern Uganda to struggle against the National Resistance government of Yoweri Museveni who himself had come to power in January 1986 after overthrowing the regime of Tito Okello Lutwa. Of these rebel movements, the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) led by Joseph Kony was the most notorious and its activities plunged northern Uganda into a civil war with devastating consequences. Whereas it began as a struggle for political inclusion of the Acholi, the LRA carried out massacres, lootings, mutilations and abductions against the very people that it claimed to fight for.

Most narratives of the civil war tend to focus on the causes, persistence and impact. Among the causes include the claim that Kony was a madman engaging in irrational campaign of violence and terror with no clear purpose; that the war was a result of the Acholi's legitimate complaints against the central government; and the assertion that the conflict was a result of the rivalry between the governments of Uganda and Sudan. The war persisted for nearly twenty years, some people argue, because the government had no interest in ending it and that political leaders were exploiting it for their own good.

In this deeply penetrating account, Evelyn Amony unpacks life inside the LRA and the civil war as well as her struggles to regain her humanity and contribute to peace building in northern Uganda following her return. Amony was born in November 1982 in Parabong village in Atiak sub-county in northern Uganda and, in August 1994, three months before her twelfth birthday, she was kidnapped by the LRA rebels. For eleven years, she lived with them until she was captured by the UPDF (Uganda People's Defence Forces) and returned to Gulu in 2005. When she was kidnapped, Amony quickly disguised her identity by taking on a pseudo name of Betty Atto in order to safeguard her family. For the next eleven years of her life, she held different positions in the LRA and was subjected to various forms of torture and deprivation. Like other captives, she painfully carried heavy loads and trekked long distances without complaining for fear of being beaten. As she narrates: 'I was given goods to carry on my head' and 'When this happened, I started to cry'. In response, 'they went and got a cassava stem and started to beat me' (p. 17). Child porters were common in the LRA and they had to keep pace with the rebels by walking, running and even ducking in order to avoid the government soldiers—initially known as the National Resistance Army (NRA) and later the UPDF.

Captives had to undergo military training during which the rebels beat and threatened them with death for reasons ranging from spilling foodstuffs, refusing to sleep with the commanders to attempting to escape. On Kony's orders, Amony was beaten by the *youngus* (young boys) till she passed out for spilling sorghum. In addition, the rebels introduced child recruits to various methods of torture and killing. One day, for instance, the author and other recruits were instructed to cut and use tree branches to kill a young girl who had attempted to escape. By writing about such incidents, Amony would like her readers and wider audience to know that it was difficult for those captured and recruited into the LRA to escape. As she notes: 'if you were caught trying to escape, you were beaten or killed'. Besides, the safety of her family was paramount: 'I didn't want to escape for the sake of the safety of my entire family. I would rather stay in the LRA than see all of them killed' (p. xii). The LRA death threats certainly instilled fear and some form of discipline in the captives.

As babysitter and later wife to Kony, Amony reveals the age, gender and power struggles among the women in the bush. She was more of a domestic slave tortured and humiliated by Kony's wives than a babysitter. They would throw her out of the house, forcing her to spend the night in the cold whenever it rained and beat her whenever she obeyed Kony's instructions. About this, she writes: 'I felt stranded. I feared that *Ladit* would punish me if I did not respond; yet if I did respond and go to him, his wives would beat me terribly upon return' (p. 23). These women hated Amony because they suspected – and rightly so – that Kony liked her. Unsurprisingly, in 1999, at the age of 14, Kony forced Amony to become his wife. This worsened his wives' animosity towards her. They beat, pinched, insulted her and accused her of taking their husband. However, Amony was no passive girl. One day she lost her head and nearly shot one of Kony's wives called Fatima who had continuously intimidated and humiliated her. As she points out: 'Fatima used to torture me as a girl, but I had also become big, and she should have respected me' (p. 43). Once she became a wife to Kony, Amony thought that she also deserved respect like the other wives.

Amony's story highlights issues of sexual assault and exploitation in the LRA. For instance, while in TeKilak, one LRA commander had ordered the *youngus* to kill her for refusing to sleep with him. 'The commanders,' Amony writes, 'would even tell us that they didn't know the real reason why they abducted us but that, truthfully, it was because they could not have sex with animals' (p. 62). LRA commanders wanted to use the children for sexual gratification although some of them were quite conscious of their evil actions. In fact, Kony himself was embarrassed about his relationship with the teenage Amony. Looking back, she writes:

He wanted me to hide when I was pregnant yet he was the one responsible for it. He wanted me to stay in Juba because it would be a disgrace for the rebel leaders to know that I was his wife. (...) People were not happy with him because I was still young and he impregnated me. (p. 53)

Kony was aware that even within the LRA, there were people who did not approve of what he was doing.

Amony encountered a lot of hardship in the bush and life was very uncertain. She gave birth to three children but lost one of them when the UPDF attacked one of the LRA camps. Her third child was born about ten days before she was captured by the UPDF. Exhausted from walking and childbirth; thirsty and without food; and amidst UPDF shooting, Amony surrendered in 2005. 'As I stood in the clearing,' she recalls, 'one of the soldiers started to shoot at me rapidly. I raised my newborn baby above my head to surrender.' However, the shooting continued: 'The bullets passed on either side of me; one passed straight through my skirt'. The soldier 'continued shooting despite my surrender'(p. 103). Eventually, the UPDF captured her. They were shocked that she had survived the bullets but they attributed that to what they thought was Kony's medicine. After capture, they led her together with others to the UPDF base where they interrogated and later transported them to Gulu Support the Children Organization (GUSCO), a rehabilitation center in Gulu. It was while at GUSCO that Amony was reunited with her family and later enrolled for a tailoring course as part of her rehabilitation.

Beyond Amony's personal experience in the LRA, the book casts light on the intricacies of the war, showing how both the LRA and UPDF died of starvation and exhaustion. Contrary to the assertion that the LRA exchanged abducted children for guns in Sudan, the author reveals that many abducted children died of hunger, thirst, cholera and exhaustion. 'In the morning,' she states, 'you would wake up and find your friend had died in the night. They would look as if they were asleep. They resembled edible rats that had died from poison' (p. 25). The LRA received food from the government of Sudan but it was never enough for them. Similarly, the UPDF also died of starvation and thirst: 'I recall walking among their corpses,' she writes. 'They would just be there seated by a tree or lying down, with their gumboots still on their feet. They died of hunger and exhaustion'(p. 68).

The author as well provides a relatively balanced picture of the war by detailing the atrocities committed by both the LRA and the UPDF. She strongly feels that: 'The truth has to be brought out that both sides committed atrocities in this war' (p. xiii). As such, both should be held accountable for what they did. Indeed, the people of Acholiland lived in fear of both the LRA and UPDF attacks. As a child, Amony saw the Ugandan government soldiers gruesomely massacre innocent civilians in Atiak Market for

purportedly refusing to respond to the commander-in-charge's call that the relatives of the LRA rebels declare themselves. Angered that nobody was going forth, the commander signalled to the soldiers who immediately started shooting innocent civilians including tomato vendors (p. 9). Amony only survived because one soldier picked her up and took her to the army barracks where she was later rescued by her aunt. While in the barracks, she saw soldiers arrive with looted stuff from the market and, to her dismay, they shamelessly blamed the massacre on the rebels. 'It was so painful to listen to the very persons who had shot and killed those in the market now sweettalking the civilians, as if they had saved them from the rebels' (p. 10). She was shocked by the propaganda of the government soldiers. In a separate incident, Amony and her grandmother nearly died when the government soldiers locked them in a hut and set it ablaze, accusing them of refusing to provide information about her cousin in the LRA. The two were saved by one army commander who kicked open the door of the burning hut and ordered them to escape. These narratives confirm that the people of Acholi suffered at the hands of both the LRA and government soldiers. While the former kidnapped or even killed them and looted their property, the latter attacked and killed them for purportedly collaborating with the rebels.

After crossing to Sudan, the LRA established bases from where it operated and received support from the Sudanese government (the Arabs). The Sudanese government provided them with food, weapons and even promised to overthrow the government of Uganda so as to allow the LRA to return home. At the same time, the LRA united with the Sudanese army to fight the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) in southern Sudan. For instance, after the SPLA attacked and killed several LRA commanders, the latter with Sudanese government support attacked and fought the SPLA till they captured Owiny-ki-Bul. However, the relationship between the LRA and the Sudanese government was not always stable. For instance, in 2000, the two disagreed and this forced the LRA to cross to Uganda where they split into two different groups, one led by Vincent Otti and Raska Lukwiya and the other by Kony and Kenneth Banya. While the former moved further into Uganda, the latter moved back and forth across the Ugandan-Sudanese border.

After some time, the LRA and the Sudanese government revived their relationship thus enabling them to return to Sudan. However, the reconciliation was short-lived and the LRA had to leave again. Struggling to evade the UPDF, they climbed the Imatong Mountains and moved till they settled at Birinyang in southern Sudan when there was a temporary ceasefire. Here the LRA cultivated gardens and planted crops but, just when the maize and sorghum were ready for harvest, the UPDF together with Sudanese government army launched a heavy and devastating attack on them. This was after Uganda and Sudan restored diplomatic relations and the latter granted the Ugandan military permission to launch the Operation Iron Fist (launched in March 2002) against the LRA in southern Sudan. Following this attack, Kony admitted that it was no longer safe to stay in Sudan and so, once again, the LRA had to leave. Without the support of the Sudanese government that had now renewed relations with Uganda, the LRA was weakened. Amony left with one group headed to Uganda, thus, marking the beginning of her return to Gulu while another group under Kony remained in Sudan.

In July 2006, a year and a half after Amony's return, the LRA and the government of Uganda entered into the Juba peace talks brokered by Riek Machar. By then the LRA had left Uganda and established its base in Garamba National Park in the Democratic Republic of Congo. During the peace negotiations, Amony played a role of a peace delegate, traveling between Gulu and the LRA base in Garamba. She also accompanied a delegation of Acholi elders, religious and cultural leaders to Nabanga for peace talks. She struggled to persuade Kony to attend meetings with the Ugandan delegates but he was very reluctant for he feared and suspected they wanted to kill him. He did not trust the Ugandan government and this was exacerbated by the fact that the International Criminal Court had issued an arrest warrant for him and his commanders in 2005. Amony's efforts to convince Kony were futile. She completely lost faith when she realized that Kony was not interested in the talks.

During her involvement in the failed peace talks, Amony noticed the change in the LRA mood and the tensions therein. In a telephone conversation with Kony during her last trip to Congo in 2007, she realized that he no longer trusted his commanders. As she states, 'the LRA commanders began to turn on one another because of the distrust purposely sown by other parties conspiring against them during the talks. It was very difficult to bring out the truth during that time' (p. 126). Suspecting that Vincent Otti had

betrayed him during the talk, Kony ordered for his execution. Kony had reached a point where he did not trust anyone, not even Amony. No wonder, when she demanded to know what had happened to Vincent Otti, he simply hung up the phone and that was the last time she spoke to him.

In her recent book, *Women and Power in Postconflict Africa* (2015) Aili Mari Tripp argues that countries emerging from major conflicts are more likely to advance women's rights and get women into leadership positions than those without conflict. During conflict women take up new roles including fighting on the war fronts and engaging in peace processes. At the end of it all, Tripp argues, such women might use the transition to peace as a time to demand for equality. While this argument is applicable in some situations, it is not the case for Amony and others whose life after the LRA was equally challenging. Indeed, her narrative brings to light the problems, frustration and deprivation faced by those who returned from the bush. Faced by lack of social support, poverty and social dislocation, some of the returnees regretted why they left the bush. Amony herself encountered lots of hardship and was constantly struggling to provide for her children and siblings.

Amony was driven by the desire to tell her story of the LRA as she lived it and leave it to readers to appreciate the complexity of the war. The book leaves one with a glaring picture of life inside the LRA.

Auteur

Pamela Khanakwa

Pagination

11 –12

Africa Review of Books / Revue Africaine des Livres

Volume 13, N°01- Mars 2017