

# Taking Spirituality Seriously: Northern Uganda and Britain's 'Break the Silence' Campaign

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**ABSTRACT** *The war in Northern Uganda is both rooted in religion and reinforced by spiritual power. This has resulted in an almost impenetrable wall of incomprehension surrounding what is the worst, most neglected war in Africa today. This paper describes conditions in Northern Uganda and relates the history of the 'Break the Silence' Campaign, initiated and coordinated by the Church Mission Society, which significantly increased political activity as a result. International religious solidarity broke the dehumanizing and isolating circle of secular indifference to the war. The Christian churches, with their presence on the ground and unique international networks, utilized largely untapped resources for crisis resolution and peace building.*

**KEY WORDS:** Uganda, Lord's Resistance Army, insurgency, Church Mission Society, Church of Uganda, internally displaced people, Acholi

## Introduction

Uganda's largely forgotten 19-year war has deep roots, as is the way of intractable conflicts. Of the 14 insurgencies since Museveni seized power in January 1986, this is the longest. This may in part be a result of Uganda's postcolonial culture of militarism, where political disputes have been settled by the gun; the Amin, Obote II and Okello regimes were all illegitimate. It may be more a result of the peculiar Acholi legacy, whereby the British used this self-disciplined people for its police force and army, in particular the King's African Rifles, and failed to develop the region economically as it had done the Buganda and other regions. War is what Acholi men do—although there is an alternative tradition. Bishop Ochola tells a moving story of the mythic brothers Gipir and Labongo, who fell out over a mislaid clan spear. The bitterness of total separation between the clans that ensued gave birth, according to the Bishop, to a new culture of non-violence, forgiveness and *mato oput*—a ceremony unique in Africa whereby reconciliation and forgiveness are achieved through the drinking of a shared cup of bitter herbs and the symbolic 'bending

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of spears'.<sup>1</sup> It is Uganda's wider recent history of state murder with impunity that made resort to violence in pursuit of so-called justice seem natural after Museveni took control.

Museveni, a secularized Munyankole from southwestern Uganda seized power in January 1986, ousting General Tito Okello Lutwa, an ethnic Acholi from the north. This was taken particularly hard by a people who saw themselves under the colonial regime as the military backbone of the nation.<sup>2</sup> Museveni's National Resistance Movement (NRM) unilaterally abrogated a treaty signed six months earlier by Museveni, General Okello and Kenyan President Moi in Nairobi in December 1985. As Museveni's fighters pushed north from Kampala, Okello's Ugandan National Liberation Army (UNLA) fled, slaughtering the population in revenge as they withdrew. The Red Cross believes that 300 000 died in the Luwero Triangle alone (Ofcansky, 1996). The Acholis of the UNLA retreated over the border into Sudan, where they regrouped, but their unpunished and unforgiven atrocities haunt Uganda still (Gersony, 1997, p. 8).<sup>3</sup> The NRA followed and behaved like an occupation force. Atrocities committed by rogue elements of the NRA around Gulu and Kitgum—in an otherwise generally disciplined campaign to stabilize Uganda as a whole—still fuel anti-Museveni feeling. The remnants of the UNLA and other dissidents formed the Holy Spirit Mobile Forces under Alice Auma, a spirit medium possessed by the Lakwena, or Messenger. Alice was a prophet, a warrior priestess initially bent on fomenting national unity through 'purification', who marched to within 80 miles of Kampala before being finally defeated and fleeing into Kenya. It is her cousin Joseph Kony, of whom we shall hear later, on whom the Lakwena—the Spirit—then fell. He took up the cause, but more as a gang leader bent on revenge than reconciliation, and still leads the cultic Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). Religion is the idiom in which the conflict has expressed itself, and by which it—and its long-suffering victims—endure. Alice's father, Severino, until recently openly ran a 'church' in Gulu; Alice was governed by the 'spirits' of former missionaries, priests and healers and Kony, a former Catholic altar boy, allegedly uses Old Testament discourses of war and punishment to mobilize his young fighters. The ill-learned lessons of the missionaries have combined with an older spiritual legacy to devastating effect. To dismiss the perpetrators as merely mad, and somehow thereby to justify international political inertia, is to fail totally to reckon with a spiritual reality that pervades all African politics. It is this fact that makes international church involvement in the resolution of Uganda's conflict peculiarly salient—and with which this article deals.

In November 2003 UN Under-Secretary for Humanitarian Affairs Jan Egeland made his first visit to Kitgum in Northern Uganda. What he found there stunned him. The man who later shocked the world with his report on Darfur regarded Kitgum as "far beyond what we see in Iraq and Palestine". The international neglect he described as "a moral outrage".<sup>4</sup>

Twenty-five thousand children had been abducted; many tortured, mutilated, put to death for minor infractions—or simply never seen again. Perhaps 100 000 people had died often horrific deaths. Up to a million people were now in camps (Reagan, 2003, p. 4) at the mercy of Joseph Kony's LRA or, equally iniquitous, of the government troops meant to be protecting them. Some had lived in those camps for nearly a decade, starving, unschooled and without the most basic amenities. And the world had simply forgotten—or never knew.

This article provides a record of what happened after the visit of the journalist who blew the whistle.<sup>5</sup> Robert Gersony's 'The anguish of Northern Uganda' can be referred to for the most comprehensive analysis of the politics of the Acholi war. Detailed work on the spirituality of the war has been done by Heike Behrend (2004) and Kevin Ward (2001), none of which this article seeks to repeat.<sup>6</sup> Instead, using the author's personal recollection of visits to and involvement in Northern Uganda, it attempts to model a type of international intervention, called 'Break the Silence', that took that spirituality seriously and, according to Acholis themselves, broke the circle of fear, violence, incomprehension and isolation.<sup>7</sup>

### **Background to a Campaign**

The West still knows very little about the Lord's Resistance Army of Northern Uganda beyond reports of a crackpot cult peopled by "rastas who don't blink".<sup>8</sup> There are one or two unpublished reports produced for the US Embassy in the mid-1990s (e.g. see Gersony, 1997 and Pain, 1997); a couple of papers in learned journals and one ethnography on the Holy Spirit Movement (HSM) of Alice Lakwena, the 'rebel priestess', who haunted the tabloids briefly during her mad purification march to Kampala.<sup>9</sup> I had been given nothing to read before my trip. All I had, perhaps rather bizarrely, were the mobile telephone numbers of two Anglican bishops still living in the north.

The situation particularly around Kitgum was far more dangerous than I had been led to believe in February 2003, when I flew to Kitgum for the first time with two Church Mission Society (CMS) personnel. Operation Iron First, the massively inappropriate US-backed military push to flush the LRA out of their Sudanese bases, had proved catastrophic. Almost at a stroke the 'internally displaced people's camps' expanded from (roughly) 500 000 to 800 000—or 70% of the population of Acholiland according to Human Rights Watch<sup>10</sup>—and the region felt like a graveyard. Massive human rights violations had also been committed by the 'legitimate' forces, the Uganda People's Defence Force (UPDF), during and after Operation Iron Fist.<sup>11</sup> The main roads were passable only in convoy—and even these were attacked, as also were World Food Programme convoys. People were deeply traumatized and starving. There were still two flights a week into Kitgum from Gulu, but that was all.

Bishop Benjamin Ojwang and his wife Margaret, who met us at the tiny airport, complained that night that all he had time for now was burying his congregations. They had lived at the Diocesan compound for less than a year. Ojwang was consecrated in February 2002 at All Saints Cathedral, Kitgum, only the second man to accept the poisoned chalice of this new diocese. That there is an Anglican church here at all, led by a gentle and humorous man who jokes in English and wears all the same rig as one's local bishop, is astonishing enough. That he is managing to hold the line for his people against terror and starvation is little short of miraculous. As we drove in, we noticed the mangled wreckage of the diocesan jeep in which his predecessor's wife had died, blown up, it is supposed, by a Sudan-supplied LRA landmine.

It was not until late at night when Ben started talking about the war and its effects on his diocese that the awful truth of our situation emerged. "They come for you at 5am. If you're still alive at 6 you know you'll be alright", he said unexpectedly, his

soft voice barely audible against the night sounds. The shadows cast by lamps; the ants marching in battalions up and down a damp wall; a huge winged bug landing on my leg and stinging me painfully: these things are etched on my mind with those words. I could not sleep that night, as I began to realize that an entire people lived with this awful tension night after night. If the rebels come, they are without mercy. They might steal food, and march the children away, roped together. Or they might kill you first. Or rape your wife in front of everyone and then hack you to death before torching your whole village. Your own people do this to you. If they took your daughter, they might return her minus lips as a warning against speaking out against her tormentors, or minus fingers as a warning against carrying weapons against them, infected with AIDS and incurable.

The two nights I spent at the compound were nights of sheer terror—and also a weird peace. From this same compound Bishop ‘Ben’ as he has come familiarly to be known, was abducted on 17 May 2004 with six members of his household and all his goats. The mad courage he showed after his rescue—“I still love you” he told his abductors—resonates with the peculiar distortions of my own feelings that night.

It was the first time in my life I had experienced physical dread. And yet any attempt to end the sufferings of Northern Uganda, and perhaps all of Africa, must address this fear to understand its vice-like grip on people’s imagination, motivation and will.<sup>12</sup> Fear in Africa, as in all traditional societies, is many faceted and insidious: fear of revenge and of the marauding spirits let loose by unforgiven or unavenged wickedness. Here, fear of the LRA’s physical brutality is compounded by a fear of Kony’s alleged supernatural powers. “This factor [spirits] cannot be ignored . . . The people believe it and we cannot ignore it. It is very difficult to get information from them”, Minister of State for Defence Ruth Nankabirwa was quoted by *The Monitor* as saying. Spiritual ‘error’ can only be addressed by spiritual ‘truth’. The courage of church leaders comes from belief in the action of a stronger spirit, not from the denial of the spiritual. The power of the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ over the spirit world is well documented in the Bible and elsewhere (Ferdinando, 1999), and receives a ready response among those with access to it.

Acute impotence, bereavement, loss of cultural patterns and the unhallowed memories of recent history additionally contribute to the hell of life for the now 85% of the entire Acholi nation who live hugger-mugger in ‘protected camps’. The huts, built in 1997 on the orders of Museveni’s men, often at gunpoint and within 24 hours, are far too close together and prone to burning from cooking fires.<sup>13</sup> The people, unable to go to their fields for food, are not fed adequately, or equipped.<sup>14</sup> By way of illustration, in Otuboi camp, Kaberamaido District there is one borehole per 6000 people. In the same camp, with a population of 15 663 internally displaced persons (IDPs), there are just 10 pit latrines, i.e. one latrine per 1566 people.<sup>15</sup> One of the most overlooked humiliations is the lack of provision for menstruating women in a landscape denuded even of leaves from trees.<sup>16</sup> Such figures cannot do justice to the misery from hunger, victimization, degradation of children’s health from ring-worm caused by lack of sanitation, and diseases like cholera and TB, which are endemic. In 2003 the local MP reported that 74% of all households in the north were without a single blanket, compared with 25% nationally (Reagan, 2003, p. 3). Ninety-one per cent of the houses were grass-thatched, compared with only 21% in western Uganda. The under-five mortality rate was 178 per 1000 live births in the north, compared

with 135 per 1000 in the central region. A staggering 70% of children in Gulu, Kitgum and Pader are under-weight or 'stunted' according to the same report. Horrifically, according to the 1989 Census, there were only 236 businesses in the whole of the north, compared with 101 793 in Central Uganda. By 2004 HIV/AIDS in the Gulu area was the leading cause of death, claiming more lives than military confrontation and constituting 69% of deaths.<sup>17</sup> 'Survival sex', where girls offer themselves in exchange for soap, food or school fees exacerbates the virtual collapse of a comprehensive health care system caused by the flight of health workers and historic underdevelopment.

Others—usually women—venture out to get water or grow cassava, believing it better to die trying to provide for themselves than die of hunger and thirst in the huts. Although some of the camps were the inevitable result of people fleeing to market centres to escape rebel attack, it is also true that Museveni was operating a scorched earth policy to punish the Acholis.<sup>18</sup> The accusation that these are actually concentration camps has more than a ring of truth. Kony's rebels seem to operate around the camps with near impunity, burning, raping, looting and abducting. And the army allegedly uses the camps to protect themselves, camping within the rings of huts, not on the exposed flanks (Ward, 2001, p. 203). What struck me forcibly, however, was the lack of anger; a whole people stupefied beyond rage.

Real horror can become a kind of pornography. But I will tell just one story as told to me by a 16-year-old abductee I will call John, who had been rescued by the UPDF. He had a small brother with whom he had been abducted, a child who was frightened and wanted to run away from the madness and go home to his mother and get on with his schooling. Joseph Kony got wind of the lad's misery and decided to set an example. He made the boy dig a small hole in the sandy ground and lie face down in it. Then he ordered 'John' to take a club and club his little brother on the back of the head until he was dead. The twist was that, just before his little brother died in unspeakable terror and pain, he was ordered to whisper in his bloody ear who had done this to him.

Hillary Andersson, BBC East Africa correspondent, gave vent to my own feelings: "Send in a mercenary crack squad, get foreign help—do whatever it takes!" she demanded in a harrowing report.<sup>19</sup>

The 'Break the Silence' Campaign was CMS's emergency response to this cry. CMS had had no missionaries in Gulu or Kitgum since 1985, despite bringing the Gospel there in 1904. Kevin Ward comments: "There was a sense that the North had a low priority for CMS in comparison with other parts of Uganda" (2001, p. 194).<sup>20</sup> And yet there was still a mutual sense of identification, the more so as the Diocese of Northern Uganda was already, remarkably, planning its centenary celebrations for November 2004. CMS's communications team resolved to try to convince the Board to back a campaign that would "highlight the humanitarian catastrophe caused by the enforced displacement of 800 000 people and seek international intervention, led by Britain, to solve the crisis, as happened in Sierra Leone".<sup>21</sup>

### **Launching the Campaign**

CMS flew Bishop Ojwang and his wife to Britain for a six-week tour on 20 August 2003, and to launch the campaign with a news conference at the Mothers' Union

HQ, Mary Sumner House in Westminster next day. His first day began with two live interviews for the BBC, first with James Naughtie of the *Today* Programme and then for Good Morning Scotland. Convinced that the Museveni government and its troops had failed the north, he pleaded for international help. Naughtie suggested that the LRA was a cult “controlling vast numbers of people, and they keep them in something akin to imprisonment”. Ojwang attempted to correct him by saying that “over one million” of his people were being kept in “protected camps” but without protection, i.e. Ugandan government protection. “No protection is being given to them. Even the Kony people can come up to the camp, and even abduct people near the camps.” Naughtie, unable quite to believe what he was hearing—he struggled with analogies of Western cults when he mentioned David Koresh, Waco and ‘brain-washing’—asked what the church could do. “Because, if it is true that 20 000 children have been abducted, quite apart from what’s being done to grown-up people by way of brain-washing, it’s obviously a crime of gigantic proportions.”<sup>22</sup>

He was right. The sheer magnitude of the problem beggars belief, defying normal categories of secular reportage. The enormity slithers away from Western comprehension, too awful, too inexplicable. How can it be that we gave Waco saturation coverage, but we have barely covered this—for 17 years? You could almost hear Naughtie’s brain grinding.

Ojwang ploughed on: “The church role . . . is a prophetic role to speak on behalf of the voiceless and appeal to you that you come and help us. We are now being defeated”. Again, he added, with affecting simplicity: “It’s difficult to control and that’s why I am coming to an international body to intervene. *It has defeated us*” (my emphasis). Ojwang—an orphaned shepherd boy who was educated at ‘bush school’ then by CMS—articulated the frustration and despair of his nation.

From the studio the Bishop went with two children and David Oyelowo, the Nigerian-born Royal Shakespeare Company actor and star of BBC’s *Spooks*, to present a petition that CMS had organized to No 10 Downing Street, with a letter to Tony Blair urging the government to “exert its role within the Commonwealth” to avert a humanitarian disaster. The letter, drafted in consultation with the Church in Northern Uganda and with Kacoke Madit (loosely the London-based wing of the Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative (ARLPI) in Northern Uganda), urged the parties to (in summary):

1. negotiate a settlement “resolv[ing] the root causes of potential conflict in the region”;
2. offer non-military support to the Ugandan government to strengthen its capacity to engage in dialogue and meet its obligations to protect the life and property of its people; and
3. “meet the immediate needs of the civilians in the ‘protected camps’ and redress the imbalance in infrastructure”.

The symbolism of the event in Downing Street, perhaps more than the substance of the letter, was a stunning morale boost—one which may be lost on those for whom such gestures are daily media fare. But for a people who have come to consider themselves as little more than animals in the eyes of their own government, it played well in the Kampala press the next day.

One of the children carrying the petition was the daughter of an Acholi émigré, Aldo Okot, a former Catholic priest turned lawyer who received asylum in Britain after the NRA coup. The other was the son of the TV satirist Mark Thomas, whose piece about the campaign appeared in *New Statesman*. "In its 'Break the Silence' campaign, the Church Mission Society has highlighted the killing of the abducted children and the appalling atrocities committed against them... Jan Egeland, has said that 'this crisis is in many ways worse than Iraq'. So where are the human rights dossiers from Jack Straw released in a blaze of publicity?"<sup>23</sup>

Ojwang and Oyelowo made speeches. Ojwang said: "We cannot give up because that means throwing the Bible away... We have to struggle even up to the end."<sup>24</sup> He also spoke to Lindsay Hilsum, International Editor for Channel 4 News who had covered the NRA campaign in the 1980s; and to several BBC World Service strands later in the day. His interview for Radio Bristol was cited by Valerie Davey, then Labour MP for Bristol West, in an important 9/11 memorial speech on the UN to mark the second anniversary of the World Trade Center bombing. She commended the 'campaign by churches' and asked that ministers remember Uganda as they sought to extend the UN remit to intervene in the internal conflicts of sovereign nations. Davey's former constituency coincides with the Diocese of Bristol, which is twinned with Kitgum. Churchmen often ask her to host Acholi clergy on advocacy visits. This twinning, the little known Anglican 'Companion Diocesan Links' Scheme, administered from Church House, Westminster, is an unresearched source of encouragement for beleaguered churches. Davey subsequently kept up the pressure, asking several questions of ministers in the House on Uganda, and signing several Early Day Motions.

CMS also arranged for Ojwang to meet the then Foreign Minister for Africa, Chris Mullin, on 17 September in Whitehall. The Bishop repeated his view that Uganda needed increased outside intervention. He proposed peace-keepers to protect the camps and suggested that Joseph Kony be hunted down and tried for crimes against humanity.

Other high profile engagements included addressing 5000 evangelical leaders at NEAC—the Fourth National Evangelical Anglican Congress at the Winter Gardens, Blackpool—and meeting the new Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams there—the only meeting to which the Archbishop agreed. A photograph of the two men embracing went around the world. Dr Williams told the Bishop he had raised the situation in private with Prime Minister Tony Blair. Ojwang also gave the blessing at the Communion Service for Europe's biggest Christian youth festival, Greenbelt, before 17 000 young people.

The Bishop's tour sparked two further years of activity by CMS. Four hundred and fifty congregations around Britain signed up to pray, give, and write to their MPs. One black Pentecostal congregation gave £24 000 for a night shelter to be built in Pader. Luton Borough Council gave permission for the town to host a weekend of fund-raising activities, after one young mother heard a CMS report of Northern Uganda's abductees on the local radio, and motivated six churches in the town to take an interest. Media activity in Britain was amplified by strong coverage in the Kampala press thanks to CMS church contacts on the Kampala-based *New Vision*. The Bishop's trip to England proved effective. It resulted in a "considerable increase in political activity" according to Foreign and Commonwealth Office officials.<sup>25</sup> In

November UN Under-Secretary for Humanitarian Affairs Jan Egeland visited Kitgum for the first time. Most VIPs only visit Gulu—reinforcing the isolation of Kitgum, Uganda’s most northeasterly outpost. Egeland was stunned by what he found, describing the international neglect it implied as “a moral outrage”.<sup>26</sup>

It is a moral outrage to see thousands of children that have been abducted going through the most horrendous torture by the rebel movement and the same groups now being neglected by the whole international community. I cannot find any other part of the world having an emergency on the scale of Uganda that has so little international attention . . . *this is far beyond what we see in Iraq, or the Palestinian territories.*<sup>27</sup>

He told the IRIN news service it was one of the last “dark spots” for international attention in the world. “Liberia, eastern Congo, all have had significant investment in trying to relieve human suffering”, he said. He intended to “more than triple” the aid budget to Northern Uganda as a result of his visit. “We told them we are massively increasing our presence in the north. My own department is set to expand from one office in Gulu to four offices in different locations in the north”, Egeland said. None of the extra money would achieve anything, he added, unless “the government makes a real effort to improve security so that our aid workers can do their job”.<sup>28</sup>

The week before Christmas the German deputy head of mission in Kampala, Holger Seubert, said that the European Union had stepped up consultations with the Ugandan government to find a solution. “The issue is being discussed in Brussels. The EU is saying there should be kind of a roadmap. From the EU, the matter will be forwarded to the Security Council in New York.”<sup>29</sup> World Vision project coordinator Michael Oruni at the Uganda Children of War Rehabilitation Project in Gulu later expressed the general perception that it was the Break the Silence campaign that changed international apathy into action:

The difference it made cannot be [over]-estimated. It pulled down Jan Egeland which made a very big difference. The US for the first time started waking up and saying: ‘Is it that bad?’

The Uganda government had, up until then, been allowed to make light of the war, Oruni said.

The government played a very big role in making the world believe this was a small issue in the backyard of Uganda. The President referred to the LRA as ‘a jigger in the toe’. You need a safety pin to remove it. That was more than five years ago.<sup>30</sup>

Egeland’s reaction had a ripple effect with aid agencies. Christian Aid, Tear Fund and Oxfam all increased their aid through appeals, and appointed new expatriate officers to the region. Amnesty International and Oxfam incorporated Kitgum into their Small Arms Campaign, launched later that year, featuring Bishop Ojwang in their publicity film. Before Christmas 2004, when Bob Geldof’s team were researching material to film for six programmes about Africa to be broadcast in



the summer of 2005, the BBC World Affairs Correspondent Mike Wooldridge referred the crew to my office at CMS. After a series of difficult negotiations, Geldof finally decided not to go to Darfur, but to film in Kitgum.

A more prosaic event may ultimately prove the most strategic: a bus trip by 15 Anglican bishops from all over Uganda to an IDP camp outside Gulu. Organized and sponsored by CMS, this was the first solidarity visit to the north by the Church of Uganda hierarchy. A US government official has described as a *sine qua non* the “fundamental reordering of the north–south relationship”.<sup>31</sup> The churches are crucial to that. Newly installed Archbishop Henry Luke Orombi led the deputation, accompanied by Revd Dr David Zac Niringiye, CMS Africa Director, himself a Ugandan. A *New Vision* reporter was also on board. The party travelled on 27 February 2004 to Pabbo, 25 miles northwest of Gulu, the largest of the 62 camps scattered all over Acholiland. For the delegates themselves the trip both shocked and galvanized. Niringiye wrote in *New Vision*: “I could not believe what I saw—sub-human existence! The most enduring sight was children—in the thousands.”<sup>32</sup> He concluded that Kony had no agenda, the situation could not be dignified with the name ‘war’ or talk of ‘negotiations’. The military solution merely resulted in the deaths of ‘soldiers’ who had been recruited at gunpoint—every one a much-loved son or daughter. It was a human tragedy, he said, which should be “exposed and isolated”, with Kony himself evacuated as Charles Taylor had been.<sup>33</sup> He then met all the editors of *New Vision* to change the way they were reporting the war. “I said to the editors—don’t just report rebels rebels rebels. Tell the human story. Tell stories of these kids.”

On 29 January 2004 President Museveni and Luis Moreno Ocampo, the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC) announced at a joint press conference at the Hotel Intercontinental, Hyde Park, London that the LRA had been referred for investigation for crimes against humanity. The ICC announced that “the prosecutor has determined that there is a sufficient basis to start planning for the first investigation” into LRA crimes against humanity. This was a generally unwelcome test case. Even by April 2005—well over a year later—the Acholi leaders were still unconvinced that enough consultation had taken place to give them the assurance that such a measure would not bring more LRA terror down on everyone’s heads. Churchmen, including Archbishop Odama, Chair of the Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative (ARLPI) and Anglican Bishop Onono Onweng of Northern Uganda Diocese, went twice with other religious and traditional leaders to The Hague in March and April 2005 to express misgivings about the ICC process. They felt the process had been imposed on them without regard to local sensibilities, or traditional methods of reconciliation, as well as of possible retributive consequences of international interference, which had ample precedents. Camps are spread out across the countryside, incapable of real protection. When Onen Kamdulu, former chief of LRA operations, gave himself up in early 2005, 50 of Kony’s forces retaliated on 21 February by attacking the Alokulum DP camp/trading centre, about six kilometres southwest of Gulu, in an attempt to kill his mother, who was known to be living there.<sup>34</sup> The urgent plea for peace-keepers has thus far been ignored by Museveni.

The initial furore of opposition that greeted the ICC initiative—amplified by Christian Aid who found itself on opposite sides to Amnesty International on the

issue—is elucidated by a comment of the Kacoke Madit co-ordinator, Caesar Nyeko Poblacks in London:

Our main argument [is that] the LRA is almost like a mad person with your child on top of the roof. Whatever mechanism you have, you can pick him up with a gun, you can pick him up with whatever, but what is really important to you, this mad man . . . is it killing him, or saving that child? Everyone knows he's a mad man, he's done bad things—but our argument which we are mistaken for sympathizing with the LRA, is how many of these children can we save, to rejoin their families?<sup>35</sup>

The world still seems powerless to rescue a child.

### **The Acholi Religious Leaders' Peace Initiative (ARLPI)**

The Break the Silence Campaign worked in consultation with its CMS partners, the Anglican bishops of Gulu (called Diocese of Northern Uganda) Nelson Onono Onweng and Benjamin Ojwang of Kitgum, as well as with Kacoke Madit in London. Both Bishops were key members of the ARLPI which Onweng had founded in 1998, after he met LRA rebels in the bush. ARLPI describes itself as “an interfaith forum which brings together Muslim and Christian (Catholic, Orthodox & Anglican) leaders in Acholiland, Northern Uganda. ARLPI provides a proactive response to conflicts through community based mediation services, advocacy and lobby and peace-building activities.”<sup>36</sup> Its motto— *Kacel pi kuc* —means ‘together for peace’ and its goal is “to create a conducive climate for sustainable peace and development in Uganda”.

ARLPI is remarkable given the Anglican–Catholic rivalry that characterized the colonial-era and that was cemented during the Amin and Obote regimes (Ward, 2001). Currently chaired by the Catholic Archbishop John Baptist Odama, the calibre of its work is the more remarkable given pressure on priests to sanction the Holy Spirit Movement in the 1980s. A Catholic priest, who was later transferred to the Diocese of St Joseph in Gulu, held masses regularly in the HSM temple at Opit, while a former seminarian worked as supervisor or altar boy there (Behrend, 2004, p. 77 f/n 7). The crucifix and the tablecloth on the altar came from the Catholic mission of the Verona fathers in Kalongo in Kitgum District. The current lack of unity of purpose among traditional Acholi leaders has helped squander peace dividends, compounded by diaspora activists whose funds have paid for Sudan-supplied weaponry.

Nonetheless, ARLPI has won credibility inside and outside Uganda in its short history, although the cost is great. Founder Bishop Onweng said: “Working with everybody who is sick makes you also sick. Spiritual work with no resources is quite hard.”<sup>37</sup> Its first Chairman, Anglican Bishop Macleord [sic] Ochola Baker, first Bishop of Kitgum, is a tall, dignified and impressive man whose own past suffering at the hands of rebels has given him considerable authority. His wife died when her jeep was mined, and his daughter committed suicide following rape by rebels. In July 2004 in Barcelona, Ochola received on behalf of the group the prestigious Chicago-based International Parliament of World Religions Paul Carus Award for

Outstanding Contributions to the Interreligious Movement. He said: "I have tried to change the game from confrontation to co-operation".<sup>38</sup> Other peace awards followed, including one from Japan in 2004.<sup>39</sup> One local Oxfam worker told me of her respect for the leaders. "People trust them. They keep their promise." When Museveni was arming the Karamojong to fight the Acholi in 2000—when practically the entire Acholi herd, the staple of their economy and culture was raided—it was Ochola who refused to allow the Acholi to arm themselves in revenge.

ARLPI notably succeeded in lobbying the Ugandan parliament for an Amnesty Bill, which became law in January 2000, guaranteeing safe passage to any rebel, including the commanders.<sup>40</sup> They worked in a context of terror on the one hand,<sup>41</sup> and of government treachery on the other to promote understanding. Priests have been murdered by Kony's rebels and imprisoned by Museveni's soldiers (Ward, 2001, p. 200). And yet, on 10 January 2005, they secured an invitation for the Acholi Parliamentary Group, religious and other leaders from Gulu to spend the day at the president's ranch in Ankole, Western Uganda. According to Bishop Ochola, Deputy Chairman of the ARLPI, this was unprecedented: "This was the first meeting in all that time. The relationship was not good. We were grateful. That improved the relationship very much."<sup>42</sup>

As Gersony points out, fear of the Acholis may have prevented more decisive protection by the Ugandan army. A US government official puts it more bluntly: "Museveni is still in punish mode."<sup>43</sup> The UPDF have in the past identified Acholis with the ousted Obote regime, with the revenge massacres against NRA supporters in the Lwero Triangle and subsequent insurgencies in the north as Museveni's NRA bedded down.

After the war ended in 1986 the International Committee of the Red Cross claimed that at least 300 000 people had died in the Luwero Triangle and that officials had failed to account for half to a third of the region's population. UNLA forces in Luwero were sometimes referred to as 'the Acholis' because of the large number of Acholis who comprised its officer and enlisted corps... NRA conduct, by comparison, was observed by international witnesses to be generally disciplined and correct.<sup>44</sup>

In June 2003 the ARLPI bishops organized a four-night sleepover with night commuters in Gulu bus park to draw in the international community. Night commuters are mostly children who stream into town from local villages and IDP camps for the night. There are thousands of them and, until 2004, there were no official shelters for them. They sleep under lorries, and on pathetic pieces of sacking in hospital compounds and on shop verandahs. Some even try to study in the available lamplight. Every morning they trek away again, those who can, to school. They travel accompanied only by older siblings and are vulnerable to TB, rape by UPDF soldiers and AIDS. The sleepover from 25 June 2003—the rainy season—was videoed, as was the desperate speech Bishop Ochola made on the first night, when he exploded the myth of 'the pearl of Africa':

The image of Uganda abroad is very shiny, very beautiful. Uganda is the model of leadership in Africa. Uganda is very prosperous. Uganda is very peaceful.

But when you talk of Uganda, you have to realize that Uganda covers a geographical area that includes northern Uganda. Even in the missionary's or ambassador's offices, [in] diplomatic mission offices in Uganda here, it is always written: 'Don't go beyond Karuma' [Bridge on the River Nile]. In other words: We have been cut off from the rest of Uganda.

He went on:

Let Museveni be the first person to cry out for these children away from the town here! Let Museveni be the first person to say that children in northern Uganda are not studying! They are not going to school! They are sleeping in the bushes! They are sleeping on the streets! Let the world know! Why can't we be realistic and accept our weaknesses? This is a weakness on the part of the government that your children, your wives, your mothers are sleeping in the cold! In which country can this happen! It cannot happen in London. It cannot happen in Paris. Where the Parliament of Uganda keeps quiet on our problem of abductions of the innocent children. What have they done to Kony? What have they done to Museveni? These children here what have they done? We are very sad. Why should they be treated like this? God gives children as a gift to parents. And they should be allowed to grow. They should be allowed to enjoy their human rights like any other children in the world. Why should they sleep in the bus park or under the verandas in Gulu here? Is that what God wants? Is that what God wants? . . . Why is the world keeping quiet? Are we not part of that body? Are we not one in Christ?<sup>45</sup>

Bishop Niringiye of Kampala is encouraging Acholi leaders to strive to achieve a consensus. He says:

One. The Acholis must speak with one voice about how to end this carnage. And two, we have got to be able to dialogue. Kony is a lunatic, a witch, all these evil things. He depends on evil spirits. We must isolate him. Although one can't dialogue with someone who cannot accept reason, there has to be a way out of violence. What was done to Charles Taylor—buy him out. He is a witch. We need to work at identifying one or two countries which are open to considering the possibility of taking him.<sup>46</sup>

With such efforts, the Church keeps a sense of shared humanity alive. It nurtures a tiny seed of hope, and goes some way to filling the vacuum in social and political action. "The churches are present in the countryside, in trading locations and towns, and in the camps in ways unparalleled by any other organization. The churches have means of access to people that the government does not. Church leaders and traditional leaders in the community often overlap" (Ward, 2001, p. 201). They keep alive the cultural memory, insisting on traditional forms of redress for wrongdoing, maintaining space for alternatives to despair (Ward, 2001, p. 198). The much-documented rituals of reparation, particularly *mato oput*, where the aggrieved parties 'drink a bitter herb' from a common vessel in mutual forgiveness is, says Ochola, pre-Christian evidence of God's grace to the Acholis.<sup>47</sup>

Sadly, the sheer scale of killing, caused by its mechanization, is beyond the scope of the old ways, while the abrupt and rationalist solutions of the West do not address the nature of the problems—and, in fact, compound them. What might be termed the ‘militarization of spirituality’ has no resonance in the West. Armies mobilized by cult leaders or priestesses, war justified by religious texts, a cocktail of Sunday school doctrines and spirit voices—the background world-view is incomprehensible to the West. Western elites must understand the spiritual nature of power and powerlessness, and the contribution of spiritual people in healing Uganda’s hurts. Ugandans understand that ‘politics’ and ‘religion’ are parts of the same terrain: that power flows between the visible material world and the invisible spiritual world. They understand that in their culture power is unitary and cannot be divided into separate boxes. As Stephen Ellis writes in *Worlds of Power*: “religious thought needs to be studied seriously if we are to understand politics in Africa today” (Ellis & ter Haar, 2004, p. 4).

### **Conclusion**

The war is not over, and children are still being abducted. It is nonetheless possible to make the following observations about the Break the Silence Campaign as an appropriate model for addressing African conflict:

- It amplified the Northern Uganda Church’s call for help, dispelling some of the spiritual fear.
- It mobilized UK churchgoers to commit to a frightening cause in prayer, letter-writing and giving. John Clark, Director of Mission and Public Affairs for the Church of England says: “Prayer generates spiritual capital in terms of morale building and encouragement”.
- It galvanized Anglican networks, and British and international agencies, more than tripling the aid budget.
- It considerably increased international political activity.
- It helped the middle-class in Kampala begin to acknowledge the Acholis’ humanity.
- It united the Church of Uganda in common cause, helping build a sense of nationhood.

The Ugandan Church uses religion to make new spaces for dialogue and new ways of transcending the crisis. Only the Church is simultaneously there on the ground, close enough to the people and their world-view, yet able to access international mechanisms of justice based on the unique history it shares with Anglican and Catholic missionary societies. Its historic links with the 206-year old Church Mission Society gave wide cross-cultural access to the reality of Acholi suffering. Northern Uganda is as a result less invisible, less remote.

Caesar Poblecks Nyeko, the Project Coordinator for Kacoke Madit, summarized the effect: “When I saw Bishop Ojwang of Kitgum actually in front of Downing Street . . . this to me felt like humanity has the same language now”.<sup>48</sup>

The campaign took spirituality seriously. The spiritual dimension of this conflict, such as Kony’s references to establishing a government based upon the Ten

Commandments, has been an excuse for lack of action by the West.<sup>49</sup> Foreign advisors have helped Museveni dismiss options for dialogue, and pursue the catastrophic military option.

Greater spiritual literacy in the international community would help render more operable the networks and resources of the world-wide church in future conflict. The most vulnerable of all, the children, might live to thank us.

## Notes

1. Conversation with author, Boma Hotel, Kitgum, 15 February 2005. See note 48.
2. See Doom and Vlassenroot (1999) for particularly sensitive material on the military and spiritual legacies of the Acholi.
3. It is the barbarity of these atrocities that are attributed by many Acholis to the peculiarly religious nature of Alice Lakwena's original mission to cleanse the land of its sins. Both Kevin Ward (2001) and Heike Behrend (2004) tell the horrific story of the killing of a pregnant woman from an area just before the Karuma bridge over the Nile. Soldiers fleeing north in 1986 not only killed the woman, but mutilated her pregnant body, tying it to a tree and leaving the dead foetus underneath (Ward, 2001, p. 198). Kony's evils are either attributed to 'vengeful spirits' unleashed on society as a result (Ward, 2001, p. 199) or, according to Msgr Cipriano Kihangire in an Easter address in 1987, believed to exist because "We can now see that these present sufferings are the result of our own sin" (Gersony, 1997, p. 9). Either way, the discourse is religious.
4. BBC World Service, *Focus on Africa*, 10 November 2003.
5. The author, a journalist and writer, was Head of Media at CMS at the time of her first visit to Kitgum and of the subsequent campaign.
6. Behrend's work studies sympathetically the Holy Spirit Mobile Forces, headed from 1986 by Alice Auma and later by her father Severino, then by her 'cousin' Joseph Kony, allegedly a former Catholic altar boy, who renamed the movement several times. All three were possessed in turn by the Spirit Lakwena—which means 'Messenger' in Acholi. Behrend makes the case that both leaders were initially attempting to purify the Acholi people—and, in Kony's case, Uganda itself (Behrend, 2004, p. 179)—from the repercussions of murder and rape after the Amin and Obote regimes, in which Acholis played a prominent part as officers and footsoldiers. However, she is clear that the movement degenerated "into ever more brutal bands of brigands" caught up "in the logic of violence and counter-violence" (p. 189). Ward examines the role of the Anglican and Catholic churches in fostering the factionalism that produced violence (Ward, 2001, p. 190)—and more latterly in articulating the suffering of the Acholis and preserving a cultural identity and public morale.
7. I refer to the *Abingdon Dictionary of Living Religions* (Crim, 1981) for a working definition of spirituality as "that which gives life to any animate thing; the inner, essential or non-corporeal dimension of any animate thing; a non-corporeal but animate substance or entity". Belief systems affect definitions in English. Only the belief system of Western secularism renders all such definitions invalid.
8. Betty Bigombe's description, in conversation with the author, Acholi Inn, 14 February 2005. Bigombe, the government peace negotiator, and former Minister for Pacification in the North, has had nine meetings in the bush with Kony and his commanders, at one of which she was forced to strip to her pants and be 'purified' with shea oil.
9. Most of these are listed in the References.
10. See Human Rights Watch, *Abducted and Abused: Renewed Conflict in Northern Uganda*, 15 (12A), New York: Human Rights Watch, July 2002, p. 4. At the time of writing, this figure had expanded to 1.6 million, cited by Hillary Benn, Secretary of State, Department for International Development, in answer to Written Question 204703, 15 December 2004. Benn was probably referring to the World Food Programme figure, as of May 2004, of a total of 1 609 744 people in camps throughout northern and eastern Uganda. World Vision reported that over 10 000 children were abducted between June 2002 and December 2003 alone.
11. Human Rights Watch, *Abducted and Abused*, Section V, pp. 41–63. My host, the Bishop's wife, Margaret Ojwang, had lost close members of her family. According to eye witnesses, they had been shot at point blank range by government forces who accused them of failing to warn them of an

- LRA ambush, when they had gone back to their fields to harvest cassava. See *Church Times*, August 2003, p. 3.
12. Acholiland has a phenomenal love of education and there are, anecdotally, 1000 Acholi PhDs—nearly all of whom live abroad. Those educated Acholis who remain, and are capable of leadership, are deeply traumatized.
  13. Eight hundred huts had burnt down, for instance, in a single fire in Parabongo Camp, six kilometres northeast of Gulu, two months before my visit there in February 2005.
  14. “The government had made no advance arrangements for health, sanitation, food or other assistance, aggravating the increased infant mortality which predictably arose in these locations” (Gersony, 1997, p. 49).
  15. Parliament of Uganda (2004, p. 19, para. 3.2.4).
  16. *Ibid.*, p. 13, para. 3.
  17. Government of Uganda statistic, cited in World Vision (2004, p. 28).
  18. Conversation with Ugandan church leader whose brother was in the UPDF.
  19. BBC World Service News, ‘Uganda’s Lost Innocents’, 5 July 2003, at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/3046426.stm>.
  20. CMS also founded girls’ education in Acholiland. For lively accounts of the CMS’s somewhat inauspicious beginnings, see Russell (1966), Behrend (2004, especially the section ‘Evangelization in Acholi and the “invention” of witchcraft’, pp. 113–119) and Ward (2001).
  21. ‘Advocacy for Kitgum’, Report to Events Officer, 2 April 2003.
  22. BBC *Today Programme* website at [http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/today/listenagain/zthursday\\_20030821.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/today/listenagain/zthursday_20030821.shtml).
  23. Mark Thomas, column in *The New Statesman*, 1 December 2003, p. 13.
  24. Mothers’ Union website report at [http://www.muwinchester.org.uk/bishop\\_ojwang.htm](http://www.muwinchester.org.uk/bishop_ojwang.htm).
  25. Note of meeting with Lord Brentford and FCO officials, 4 November 2004.
  26. BBC World Service, *Focus on Africa*, 10 November 2003.
  27. Emphasis added. The comparison with Palestine was not picked up anywhere.
  28. [http://www.up.ligi.ubc.ca/news\\_feature\\_story.htm](http://www.up.ligi.ubc.ca/news_feature_story.htm).
  29. ‘Donors propose plan for peace’, *The Monitor*, 17 December 2003.
  30. Conversation with author at World Vision project offices, Nakasero Road, Gulu, 15 February 2005.
  31. Email to author 20 April 2005.
  32. *New Vision*, 8 March 2004.
  33. Niringiye, an international missionary statesman and theologian was consecrated Assistant Bishop of Kampala on 22 August 2004.
  34. ‘Army kills six rebels in Gulu’, *New Vision*, 26 February 2005.
  35. Interview with author, Kacoke Madit offices, London, 11 March 2005.
  36. ARLPI publicity flyer.
  37. Conversation with author at Diocesan Compound, Gulu, 14 February 2005.
  38. <http://www.cpw.org/2004parliament/parliament/carus.htm>.
  39. ARLPI was the first African organization to receive the Niwano Peace Prize, after 21 years.
  40. Surrender is not the appropriate word, since it implies military success where this was plainly absent. Kony condemned the Amnesty and returnees testify that one of his techniques to continue holding abductees hostage is to tell them they will not be accepted by their community if they try to return home. So far the Act has handled more than 12 000 cases around the country, 42.5% are ex-LRA (World Vision, 2004).
  41. BBC, ‘Church fears Uganda rebel threat’, 17 June 2003, at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/2996824.stm>.
  42. Conversation with author, Hotel Boma, Kitgum, 14 February 2005.
  43. Email to author, 20 April 2005.
  44. Gersony (1997, p. 9), citing Ofcansky (1996).
  45. Text supplied in email by Kacoke Madit, London, 26 June 2003.
  46. Telephone conversation, 26 April 2005.
  47. A good eye-witness account of the *mato oput* ritual is given by Fr Carlos Rodriguez in a report, *Whose Justice? Perceptions of Uganda’s Amnesty Act 2000: The Potential for Conflict Resolution and Long-term Reconciliation*, published by the Gulu-based Refugee Law Project. He writes: “Homicide, in Acholi cultural belief . . . asks for revenge and, as a consequence, it provokes fear”.

48. Interview with author, Kacoke Madit offices, London, 11 March 2005.  
49. World Vision (2004), p. 15.

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