Northern Uganda

The Acholi Religious Leaders’ Peace Initiative: local mediation with the Lord’s Resistance Army

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For two decades, northern Uganda was ravaged by war between the Government of Uganda and the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA). The Acholi Religious Leaders’ Peace Initiative (ARLPI) – an inter-denominational religious network – evolved to support community peace mobilisation. This article traces the development of the ARLPI from its grassroots beginnings to its role as a credible intermediary between LRA commanders in the bush and the government. In the absence of sustained formal peace efforts, the lack of credible intermediaries and the frenzied violence perpetrated by the LRA and state armed forces, the group became an important voice for peace.

The LRA emerged in the years after the overthrow of the military junta in Uganda in 1986 by Yoweri Museveni’s National Resistance Army (NRA). In Acholiland, northern Uganda, a number of armed groups formed to resist the new regime, including the Ugandan People’s Democratic Movement/Army (UPDM/A), and the Holy Spirit Movement (HSM) led by the charismatic Alice Auma. The HSM suffered a major defeat in 1987 and the UPDM/A eventually concluded a settlement with the government, but disaffected remnants of both groups came together from 1987 in what would later become known as the LRA, led by Joseph Kony. The LRA claimed it was fighting against economic mismanagement and undemocratic governance by the new government, and the widespread human rights violations committed by the army in Acholiland. This was accompanied by spiritual belief: LRA fighters saw their struggle as a divine cause guided by God through his prophet Kony.

Initial resistance to the NRA was widely supported by the Acholi population. As conflict escalated between the Ugandan Army (the Uganda People’s Defence Force – UPDF) and the LRA, both directed their operations as much against local populations as each other, exposing civilians to brutal violence and fracturing Acholi society; thousands were mutilated, raped and killed.

In 1991, the government initiated a policy of forced displacement of the population into “protected camps” as part of its Operation North counter-insurgency campaign. This effectively sealed off much of the north from the rest of the country – although the camps had in fact been established unofficially since 1986. The LRA became increasingly reliant on the Sudanese government in Khartoum, which used it as a means to destabilise southern Sudan. Kony resorted to the forced recruitment of children, both girls and boys, from Acholi populations, abducting an estimated 30,000 minors by 2006.

The formation of the ARLPI

Early peace efforts were unsuccessful. The most significant initiative came in 1994, when the State Minister for Northern Uganda, Betty Bigombe (an Acholi), embarked on negotiations with the LRA on behalf of the government. However, talks collapsed when President Museveni asserted that the LRA was using them as cover to re-arm in Sudan and issued an ultimatum for the rebels to “surrender or be crushed”.

In 1997, a number of religious leaders, many of whom had been personally affected by the conflict, came together to speak out against the violence. They included the then Anglican Bishop of Kitgum Diocese, Macleod Baker Ochola II; the Catholic Archbishop of Gulu, Archdiocese of Northern Uganda, John Baptist Odama; the Episcopal Vicar of the Catholic Church, Monsignor Matthew Ojara; Fr. Carlos Ludigrie; and Fr. Joseph Genna. The ARLPI, an inter-denominational body, brought together Catholics, Anglicans, Muslims, Orthodox Christians, Seventh-day Adventists and Born-Again Faith Federation worshippers under one umbrella.
In 1998, the ARLPI held its first official public event. Bedo Piny pi Kuc (sitting down for peace) drew over 150 Acholis, including parents of abducted children, traditional chiefs and community elders, local council leaders, teachers and community workers, to discuss the effects of the conflict on the community and strategies to overcome it. Their main concerns included the inability of government forces to protect them, forced displacement, LRA and UPDF atrocities and looting, and the return of abducted children.

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There was a general sense of anger that the government had undermined Betty Bigombe’s peace efforts. Despite a decline in support for the LRA, participants were frustrated that the government was not addressing the political issues raised by the rebels. The humanitarian crisis also required urgent attention. Concerned mothers in particular made an emotive plea to be given the opportunity to talk to rebel leaders. A consensus emerged that the war could not be won through military action, that the community should demand a peaceful resolution to the conflict, and that the conflict parties should be brought together in mediated dialogue.

These decisions were influenced by the traditional values and norms of the Acholi people, which emphasised reconciliation and restorative approaches rather than acts of revenge. The ARLPI stressed the importance of non-violence and alleviating the suffering of the people, and argued that most of the rebel fighters did not go to the bush of their own volition and that there was therefore a moral imperative to safeguard the lives of these abducted girls and boys. The ARLPI’s work was key to changing the way the community spoke about the LRA: rather than simply being perpetrators of violence, some were seen as the victims of abduction whom the government had failed to protect.

The ARLPI and other community leaders began to organise peace rallies and prayers. These provided a source of support for communities affected by violence, but were also intended to demonstrate communities’ need and desire for peace to the government and the LRA. Various attempts were also made to build links with LRA fighters in the bush, including by putting peace messages in newspapers and on posters in markets that LRA members were known to frequent. Programmes on the state-run Radio Freedom, and later Mega FM, provided a forum for people to voice their views and raise issues directly with both the LRA (whose members were known to tune in) and state security forces.

The ARLPI also wrote pastoral letters – open letters in the press – to the LRA and the government. The letters highlighted the urgent need for a peaceful resolution of the conflict and spoke out strongly against forced displacement and the poor conditions within displacement camps. The messages also encouraged the LRA to come to church on holy days, where it was hoped they could be encouraged to return to their communities.

Reaching out to the LRA

Many ARLPI figures were known to the LRA and many traditional leaders maintained informal contacts with LRA cadres, in particular abductees with kinship ties to communities. Kony himself had been a choirboy and had respect and affinity for Catholic Priests. Yet, direct contact with the LRA high command was difficult, especially after the main leadership shifted to southern Sudan. It was also dangerous: the LRA had killed three traditional leaders who, prior to Bigombe’s efforts, had sought to convince it to engage in peace talks.

The enactment of the 1999 Amnesty Law, and the subsequent establishment of an Amnesty Commission, strengthened the ARLPI’s position. It gave them the legal and political space to pursue dialogue and reinforced the moral imperative of forgiveness to those who had been abducted. Members of the diaspora were integral to providing an international spotlight on the amnesty issue in order to convince the Ugandan government. Acholi parliamentarians were also instrumental in ensuring the Act was pushed through the legislature despite reluctance from the government, while broad popular support within the Acholi population further facilitated the process.

The ARLPI tried to connect to the LRA through traditional leaders in Uganda and certain individuals in Nairobi who claimed to have access to Kony. A breakthrough came in October 1999 when a message was delivered to the then Anglican Bishop, Nelson Onono-Onweng, through Yusuf Adek, a close adviser to Kony. The bishop was taken alone to an unknown location to meet with LRA commanders. Subsequent harassment and surveillance by the UPDF delayed further contact. Eventually, in April 2001, other religious and traditional leaders were able to meet face-to-face with high-level LRA officers. The main focus of talks was the implementation of the 1999 Amnesty Law, which allowed combatants to report to religious leaders.

However, a massive military offensive launched by the government in March 2002, Operation Iron Fist, pushed the LRA back into northern Uganda. Abductions and attacks on civilians intensified as the LRA extended its reach beyond Acholliland into the Lango and Teso sub-regions. Communities, unconvinced by ARLPI calls for negotiations, rallied into self-defence groups called Arrow Brigades, to join with the UPDF in fighting the LRA. This trend was compounded by ethnic tensions as Langi populations attributed atrocities to the “Acholi” LRA.

Yet, opportunities for dialogue still emerged amid the violence and discord. Archbishop Odama received a direct call from the LRA’s second in command, Vincent Otti, who asked religious leaders to mediate between the government and the LRA. ARLPI leaders took advantage of this show of trust to begin dialogue. Selected ARLPI members and traditional leaders trekked unescorted into the bush and met with the
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Archbishop Odama and Bishop Ochola II met with President Museveni in April 2002 to obtain official permission for religious and traditional leaders to talk to the LRA. This was granted on condition that the bishops would report to government security operatives after each meeting with the LRA. The ARLPI sought to highlight its impartiality as a “bridge for peace” between the LRA and the government. In meetings with the LRA it asked that all demands and commitments be written down and signed to avoid accusations of inventing or changing the positions of the LRA or the government. The ARLPI had more than 24 meetings with the LRA, with minutes of all meetings recorded and hard copies given to both the Ugandan President and the LRA for transparency and consistency.

However, from the outset, meetings between community leaders and the LRA came under attack from government forces. The second meeting in April 2001, near Pajule, was violently interrupted by the UPDF, and a cultural leader was injured. The fifth round of meetings in Pajule in April 2003 was abruptly halted as a result of direct and heavy bombardment by UPDF troops lasting three days. After the bombing stopped, the army demanded that the bishops would report to government security operatives after each meeting with the LRA.

The LRA in turn accused the ARLPI of acting as bait for the government. Kony ordered his commanders to kill any religious leaders who attempted to contact the LRA again. Amid increasing violence, the ARLPI sought to clarify its position, arguing that it could not have been complicit, since its own leaders were in the bush to mediate and would not sacrifice their fellow religious leaders, let alone condone any act of violence.

Initial meetings were dependent on LRA communication. The LRA would contact a particular person through a letter or personal message – often traditional leader Rwot Oywak of Pader District or Fr. Carlos Rodriguez – who in turn would inform the other religious and traditional leaders. The LRA would choose the time, place and the persons who should attend. Archbishop John Baptist Odama, Sheikh Musa Khalil, Bishop Ochola II, and Fr. Carlos Rodriguez were those most frequently called upon to meet with senior LRA commanders.

At each meeting, the community leaders appealed to the LRA not to kill civilians, to allow the return of abductees and to pursue peace and reconciliation. The LRA representatives adamantly refused, arguing that they were defending themselves against UPDF attacks and should not be condemned. It was difficult to understand this argument since they were killing innocent people in villages, instead of attacking the military barracks in the Acholi sub-region.

The LRA also came under pressure from government forces to accept “escort and protection”, but the LRA drew a line on the map beyond which government forces were not allowed to proceed. As a result, the government accused the religious leaders of being “rebel collaborators”. In March 2002, Uganda passed an Anti-Terrorism Act making

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Maintaining impartiality despite insecurity

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The road to Juba

As fighting continued, formal attempts to facilitate talks between the Presidential Peace Teams and the LRA faltered in 2003, with the LRA refusing calls to assemble in “safe zones” without wider safeguards. But the ARLPI was able to resume its dialogue role, delivering letters of exchange and liaising with the government through key Acholi members of parliament and religious networks. The LRA began to respond to demands to release captives, although atrocities against civilians were still being committed. The release of abductees one day might be followed by the capture of another group of children the next.

The ARLPI helped to bring national and international attention to the conflict, in opposition to Ugandan government attempts to contain the situation by presenting it as a domestic problem requiring an exclusively domestic solution. In late 2003, ARLPI Chair Archbishop Odama led a ten-person team on an advocacy tour of the United States, Canada and Europe, promoting a research report by the Afrika Study Centre and Human Rights and Peace Centre, Makerere University, *The Hidden War, the Forgotten People: War in Acholiland and its Ramifications for Peace and Security in Uganda*.

The ARLPI also benefited from international state and non-state support and advocacy, which played an important role in highlighting the issue internationally and putting pressure on the Ugandan government.

For years, young children in northern Uganda trekked long distances to town centres and spent the night in the streets for fear of abduction. They became derogatively called “night commuters”. In 2003 religious leaders led by Archbishop Odama communted with the children and spent four nights sleeping with them in the bus park in Gulu. This attracted mass national and international media attention and spurred many humanitarian agencies and governments to respond and provide support to ease the plight of the suffering children.

The government eventually called a seven-day ceasefire in late 2004 to enable Betty Bigombe to pursue talks with support from the US, the UK and the Netherlands, but hostilities continued.

As the Government of Sudan and the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement/Army edged towards signing a Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), the LRA’s position in Sudan was becoming more vulnerable. The CPA, signed in 2005, gave southern Sudan semi-autonomous status under the Government of Southern Sudan (GoSS). The Netherlands-based NGO IKV Pax Christi facilitated contact with the Vice-President of GoSS, Dr. Riek Machar, who was able to undertake a mediatory role between
the Ugandan government and LRA. Numerous trips were made by delegations, including the ARLPI, to Kony’s new bases in the Garamba forest in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), to communicate mutual concerns and positions. These were viewed as instrumental in persuading the LRA leadership to pursue the peace talks that began in Juba, southern Sudan, in 2006 and which would last for nearly two years.

ARLPI members were invited to the Juba talks as observers. On several occasions during the negotiations, both the LRA and government negotiation team reverted to ARLPI members to clarify certain issues pertaining to the negotiating agenda. The ARLPI also played a key role in keeping communities informed, thereby encouraging public support for the peace process.

Five agreements were signed in Juba covering justice and accountability and demobilisation, disarmament and reintegration. But Kony failed to show up twice to sign the Final Peace Agreement, citing dissatisfaction with the handling of reparations. While outreach to the LRA has had varied results, the LRA’s ability to move between armed groups, communities and national and international actors has been important.

Since 2008 there have been three calls from purported LRA representatives seeking to revitalise talks, but there has remained a persistent lack of credible contact. LRA operations and bases are now scattered between Western Equatoria in South Sudan, the DRC, the Central African Republic (CAR) and the volatile Darfur region of Sudan. The possibility that the Ugandan government has modern monitoring technology supplied by US advisers has probably made the group wary of using communications devices.

The ARLPI, together with sister churches and traditional organisations in Uganda, South Sudan, DRC and CAR, have formed a Regional Taskforce on the LRA, supported by international NGOs [see Regional community peacebuilding: a conversation with John Baptist Odama, in Accord 22, 2011]. This meets regularly to review the LRA situation and continues to seek contact and the possible resumption of peace talks.

Conclusion
The ARLPI has faced many challenges in its attempts to dialogue with the LRA and promote peace within the community and more broadly. It has encountered suspicion from opposing sides and operated in often volatile conditions. Communities are divided and sometimes resistant to the peace efforts.

A large part of the ARLPI’s work has involved supporting traditional Acholi reconciliation processes [Mato Oput], preparing the community to receive former combatants, and promoting the Amnesty Law through translating and distributing Luo versions. This has involved overcoming differences in opinion and denomination within the ARLPI, and in-depth and heated discussion on issues of accountability, including the role of the ICC and of traditional justice mechanisms such as truth-telling processes and reparations. While outreach to the LRA has had varied results, perhaps the most significant part of ARLPI’s work has been in strengthening community resilience and unity in the face of extreme violence, and building people’s confidence and willingness to support peacebuilding activities.

BOX 2
Conversation with former LRA Commander Captain Ray Apire

Captain Ray Apire was abducted by the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) in 1993 from his home village of Lamola in Kitgum district, northern Uganda. He served as the LRA’s Chief Catechist (faith teacher) until he surrendered to the Uganda People’s Defence Force (UPDF) in 2004. Since then he has counselled new LRA returnees at the UPDF Child Protection Unit in Gulu.

Why do you think the LRA was willing to talk to ARLPI representatives?
The LRA does not trust anybody. That is why it has survived for so long. When I say LRA, I mean Joseph Kony. He gave the orders and decided for us, although he would often say it is the “spirit” in him talking. For example, when he decided to convene a general parade he would tell us that the spirit had directed him to do so.

We did not know the ARLPI as an organisation. But we knew certain members who were prominent religious leaders. Kony was an altar boy himself when he was younger. He had a respect for religious priests, especially Catholic ones. When operations and ambushes took place he ordered fighters to avoid disturbing the priests.

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Why was that?
We heard that he wanted to become a priest himself. I think that is why he allowed Vincent Otti, his second in command, to call Archbishop Odama [a member of ARLPI]. Kony is a very intelligent man. He would say that the spirit forbids him to talk, and he would get his senior commanders like Otti and later Sam Kolo to speak on his behalf. When Kony does decide to speak, he talks like a machine gun – tatatatata – without being interrupted.

So what happened after the call by Vincent Otti to Archbishop Odama?
I was not very involved in operations, but I overheard a conversation about dropping a letter to the Archbishop’s residence. That was communicated the community’s concerns to the LRA. He claims that he is being guided by the “spirit” so no one can question it. Kony called Mega FM [a radio station based in Gulu, which broadcasts a number of peace programmes] to discuss the abduction of children and the suffering of the people. He said that people were aware of the ongoing war between the LRA and Government of Uganda, and if they put themselves in harm’s way the LRA was not responsible. He said that government soldiers were doing most of the killing and then blaming the LRA. On the question of abduction, he said that the Acholi people were infected with evil and it was his responsibility to start a new, clean tribe.

In subsequent meetings, the religious leaders did not go alone but were accompanied by other community members. Did the LRA trust the community leaders?
Not at all. Kony used to say the Acholi community is like dogiryo – a two-headed snake that changes direction at its convenience. They will speak to you nicely and then say something different to the government. Out of respect for the religious leaders, those who accompanied them were tolerated. In 1996, two community elders, Samson Okot-Ogoni and chief Olanya-Lagony [who tried to broker peace between the LRA and the government], were killed. The LRA felt that everyone disliked them so it became very difficult to trust anybody.

In its riyo tal [mediation] role, the ARLPI communicated the community’s concerns to the LRA – that it should stop abducting innocent children and end the conflict that was causing a lot of suffering to the people. How did the LRA react to this?
When that request was relayed to Kony he consulted his close commanders. Kony consults a lot but makes his own decisions. He claims that he is being guided by the “spirit” so no one can question it. Kony called Mega FM [a radio station based in Gulu, which broadcasts a number of peace programmes] to discuss the abduction of children and the suffering of the people. He said that people were aware of the ongoing war between the LRA and Government of Uganda, and if they put themselves in harm’s way the LRA was not responsible. He said that government soldiers were doing most of the killing and then blaming the LRA. On the question of abduction, he said that the Acholi people were infected with evil and it was his responsibility to start a new, clean tribe.

Did the LRA agree it should talk to the government? How was it convinced?
The LRA had all along wanted to talk peace with the government. Even when it was fighting, it said it was fighting for peace. The LRA’s argument was that the government did not want peace.

Did you notice any change in the LRA’s behaviour or activities after its interactions with ARLPI?
The possibility of talking peace raised morale in the camps. I think many of them [LRA combatants] were becoming tired of fighting, and increasingly unconvinced by the promise that the government would be overthrown. But they were afraid to express their true wishes; they feared that Kony had the power to know when he was being discussed. It was serious psychological torture on the combatants.

Did the ARLPI initiative have any bearing on the Juba peace talks?
Juba was another matter. After the UPDF Operation Iron Fist [2002–05] Kony seized on an opportunity for Riek Machar [a Sudanese politician] to contact the Government of Uganda and mediate negotiations with the LRA. The ARLPI had sowed the seeds for peace talks and the LRA built on this. Juba was a very intricate “football match”. There were a lot of organisations around Juba at that time and I cannot say much about the role of ARLPI in the actual talks.

Did the LRA leadership want to continue dialogue after the breakdown of the Juba talks?
The bombing of the LRA’s main base in Garamba forest convinced them, in my opinion, that the government was not sincere about talks. That is why there is complete silence now. You need to talk from a position of strength. I think the LRA is not as strong as it was during the Juba talks. Perhaps in the future, if it gains strength, it will want to talk again. Many other people have entered the conflict in Garamba – the Americans, the armies of the Democratic Republic of Congo and South Sudan. I am told that the African Union has also joined and that the UPDF is still chasing the LRA. Which side should be involved in talks with the LRA, or will they all be brought together?

Finally, do you think the ARLPI can still play a role in terms of dialogue with the LRA?
Personally, I think peace talks can still work. It would be good if someone could find a way to contact the LRA top leadership. But it is very difficult to know what is happening now in the organisation of the LRA. If they are in disarray as reported, then it will be difficult to organise talks again.

The reasons Kony gave for not signing the Juba Agreement need to be considered as well. This [lack of trust] was made worse by Operation Lightning Thunder [2008–09]. Who can he trust, especially with so many forces after him now? It may be a good idea if the ARLPI can find a way to reach him. Perhaps he will still trust them like he did in the beginning. But as I said, it is very difficult to know what is really going on within the LRA.