

A Bridge to the Return

Gulu Archbishop John Baptist Odama

Archbishop John Baptist Odama was appointed in 1996 by Pope John Paul II as the first Bishop of Nebbi Diocese. In 1999 he was appointed as the first Archbishop of Gulu, where he has served since. In 2002 Archbishop Odama was elected Chairperson of the Acholi Religious Leader's Peace Initiative (ARLPI), a group of interfaith leaders who have been integral in the negotiations between the LRA and the government. From his unique perspective as both a religious leader and conflict mediator, the Archbishop reflects here on the process towards, and hope for, peace in his homeland.

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For more than two decades northern Uganda has been caught up in this conflict between the rebels of the LRA and the Government. You've been integral in the peace process of northern Uganda. Can you explain your role?

My role in the peace process has been a double line. First, as the Archbishop of Gulu, which I have now been for the last ten years, and then beginning in 2002, as the chairman of the Acholi Religious Leader's Peace Initiative, which is an interfaith group; the Anglicans, the Catholics, the Muslims, the Orthodox... we sit together for peace, and to advocate locally, nationally, and if possible internationally to bring the attention of the world together to work for the end of this.

It (ARLPI) had started like this: In 1988 we had here Comboni Sisters like those of Sister Dorina Tadiello and a group of Comboni Samaritans who used to pray here. They used to invite members of other faiths here to pray with them - to pray for peace. This was private, more or less, but drew the attention of many people, as they thought it was a good thing to do. It was then taken later to Kitgum, and the people of Kitgum brought it out now openly between the Catholics and the Anglicans. The bishop of Anglican Church in Kitgum together with the fathers there, like Father Carlos, they organized public prayer, and invited other people of other faith. This was picked in 1992, and then brought to Kampala. In 1998 the groups who had been participating in prayer thought of sitting together; they called it Bedo Ping- in Acholi it means a gathering, or a sitting together. In this gathering all the main religion's leaders were invited, with the theme being 'together for peace.' This was the initial stage of formalizing what was to become the ARLPI. They continued to organize prayers, and up to now they continue... networking with all the peace actors and organizations.

When I came in I added some impetus to the group. On my first day (as Archbishop) I declared to the public that my first priority was to work for peace. On that day, I remember, I lifted a child - a young boy - held him in my hands, and asked him 'do you want to see the war continue?' The child shook his head, no. 'Do you want peace?' He shook his head, yes. Then I told the people, 'We have an obligation to make sure this child, and all the people, grow in an atmosphere - live in an atmosphere - of peace.' So this was set as my first priority.

When they elected me as the chairman of the ARLPI there was this (military operation against the LRA) "Iron Fist." I convened the leaders in this very room, and said that we need to take a very bold stance about what to do on this issue. We made an agreement of which there were four points, and we took these to the President. One: Please, President, provide enough security for the population. Two: There's not enough food for the population. Make sure people have enough food. Three: This war has gone on too long, why don't you go in to initiate peace talks? Then, Four: We said, as ARLPI we are ready to cooperate if you request our help. He gave us three weeks; He said 'I want you to contact the LRA - if you can meet them, let me know what their reaction is.'

We took the challenge very seriously, and in ten days, on July 14th, 2002 we met those of Vincent Otti in the Kilak area. There was a priest who was staying here, there was my driver, and two political people... about five of us. Kolo was inside - by then he was a Colonel; there was another one - Achelam; there was Nyeko, who was a brigadier... about six of them (rebels). I said to them, 'look, honestly, you two (the LRA and the Government) have been like two elephants thrashing the grass. And this grass is the population. Today I've come here to tell you better take the peace approach.' He (Otti) was a bit



aggressive - he thought I was sent there by the government, which I was not. I told him I'm not here on behalf of the government, but rather, on behalf of the people... the people who are suffering. I've brought the voice of the people, who want an end to this war. He (Otti) said, 'Okay, if the government wants to talk, then okay.' I said, 'why do you continue with something which is not producing?'

After this I had several more meetings with them (the LRA). Immediately after this meeting I had to go to the eastern side to meet those of (Charles) Tabuley met him on the 17th of July. (Now he's dead... In fact, almost all of these (LRA) leaders are dead.) I met his team, and more or less talked the same thing. After these meetings we came here (Gulu), compiled a report, and then went to present this to the President. After presenting our report to the President, he accepted that we initiate the role of shuttling between the two sides.

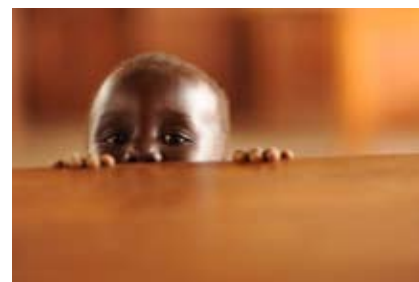
We continued to meet with the rebels and the President. We made them both write everything down and then would take it to the other side. We didn't want to interpret. This process made us a kind of bridge for these groups to walk on. It was very risky, but we took the risk for the sake of the people - for the sake of that child whose voice was very clear. We became like servants the people were sending. 'Tell them we don't want this war.' It became a mission. For me personally I found it was a motivation of compassion, and of being moved, being a shepherd. Living with people who have been under war for so long, who have been living with tension, depression, with all sorts of inconveniences, and worse still to live in the situation of a camp - one in which they were more or less helpless in front of the reality. So this touched me as a shepherd, and as a leader. It pushed me really to move on and takes all sorts of risks no matter the cost. In the middle of this process I was informed by the President that the

LRA planned to kill me. I received a letter, and said 'okay, it doesn't matter, we still must have a link with these people.' We can abstain from meeting them in the bush, but we need to maintain the link. We networked with the international organizations, and with the UN. In January 2006 I visited the UN and insisted to them that the peace talks was the only means now.

What was the motivation behind the peace talks?

We wanted peace talks because it is through forgiveness and through mercy that you rebuild broken relations - not anything else. There is first forgiveness, which then leads to reconciliation. Through this each side who has done wrong to the other accepts guilt of the wrong that has been done. We thought this was the best way because this is the attitude that fights impunity. This is the approach, because the one who has committed the crime admits in front of those who it's been done to is in a way saying 'I'm not going to do this again.' And if society helps a person to remain faithful to that vow, things can improve. Normally at the end of this reconciliation you need to have a symbol to say that what has happened has been bad, to remember it. It links the people, and the communities also.

We continued this networking until the (Juba) peace talks began in July 2006. Interestingly, the peace talks began on the very day we'd gone to meet those of Otti four years earlier. Our group was called to remain as observers in the peace talk process. We also played a role of advising - when we felt the two sides were thinking too much about themselves we could advise, again bridging them. At all these times the two sides would sign the agreements. In Juba there were five sides to the agreement. The first was cessation of hostilities. This took the shortest time. By the 26th of August they had reached a conclusion on this, and signed it. The second was



a comprehensive solution, dealing with what, when, and why... This took a long time. At a certain moment they even stopped.

The LRA one time said they were going to withdraw... this is where we worked, for example, silent, in the background, trying to convince the LRA to continue - to remind them that the purpose we're working for is peace, and to remind them to think about the people in the camps, telling them (LRA) 'that must always be in the back of your mind.'

And did this seem to have an impact on the LRA?

As we talked to them at times they would be thinking about their allowance, or their welfare. But we could convince them that the key thing was to think about the people. So, the role we played was really to maintain, as the people of AVSI also support, the resilience of the population. We kept the hope of the people that there would be an end, and that they should not give up. We kept also the awareness of the international community about this war. Indirectly too, our struggle made the nation of Uganda to feel that this war was not just a war of the Acholi, but was a Uganda issue. The people would say 'We thought this thing was just there, now you're bringing it to our door...no, no. Now you must end this war.' Because our advocacy as (ARLPI) had a very strong voice the nation also began to pick our views that dialogue would be the best.

The issue of amnesty came up, was picked by the nation, and pushed through parliament. Many people benefited from this. We advocated that as a nation we have this responsibility to the people who have been abducted. As a nation we were supposed to protect them, so now how can we be the very people organizing to go and fight them. That was one of our reasons why we said peace talks were the best way. This is the moral issue. We need diplomacy. This is what we pledged.

The third item on the agenda was accountability and reconciliation. The two sides felt that with the war, they were the ones who fought it, and the other side was the one responsible for the atrocities. We said that those who were the key promoters of atrocities must be investigated by an independent body. All those identified must be brought to book. They proposed two approaches. For the Government it was the court marshal. For the LRA it was Mato Oput. The correct term was the Special High Court to address these issues. They did not pick with the ICC. They felt this was an alternative now to ICC that would uplift and improve the laws of Uganda, then they would try these people in the special Division of the High Court to handle the crimes committed during the war.

The fourth thing was the permanent ceasefire, which was a natural conclusion. And then, the fifth piece of the agreement was disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration. The two parties actually agreed on all these - they finished them. They discussed and finished everything, with the signatures of the leaders of the delegations. What now remained was the final disagreement between the President of Uganda and the leader of the LRA. The key thing that brought this, in the mind of Kony (LRA leader), was always the issue of the ICC. The two sides had agreed during the period of accountability that the issue of ICC would be taken to the Security Council by the Government after the final peace agreement was signed. But when it was taken to Kony he thought it the other way around. This is where the great snag was. When we were to sign the final agreement on the 10th of April, 2008 he was not coming. The fear of ICC was there; his fear that he would have been arrested at that time. There were individuals sending him signals not to come. 'Don't sign.' It was unfortunate because they did not see deeper than what they were saying. That prolonging this thing will cause more problems. Instead of giving



him confidence, it was the other way around. It was a terrible disappointment.

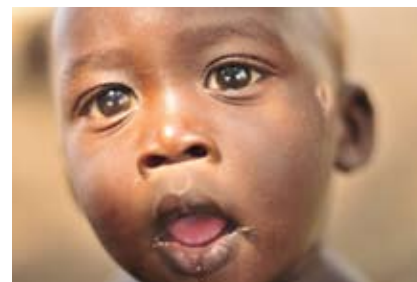
Where do you see this strength in the people coming from? Even after April, they still want to forgive. Where does this resilience come from?

The culture of this population is about unity as a strength. Unity is a means of continuity of the future; harmonious living is the only way to ensure the future of the tribe. That's why they went for Mato Oput, which is a ritual of reconciliation to bring the two sides who have come into conflict together. Crime must be subordinated by the harmonious restoring of the broken relation. They have a ceremony to exchange the animals. This is an exchange of acceptance for each other. Traditionally the two animals are cut in two. Part goes this way, and the other part that way... It's supposed to be lamb, or if there is no lamb, then they can use goat. This is a sign of saying 'ok now we've accepted that things have gone wrong, but we can now eat together. This is sign of accepting, to say that we can share. From here now they go to the next stage. Bringing a calabash with the root of the Oput tree, they squeeze the root into the calabash with water, and sometimes the blood of the lamb and local brew. Then the two sides will get the closest relative of the victim, and the closest relative of the perpetrator, who will kneel down facing each other, with their hands behind them while they put their heads in to drink this juice. This ceremony has a lot of meaning: The calabash itself represents commonality - it is one source. In it there is the juice of Oput. They selected this tree because they are generally together, always in a group, never alone. Now, the juice is a bit sour, but they accept together that what has happened was bitter. Another element is that with them kneeling down it is a sign of humility, and equality, accepting the truth of it. Many times their foreheads touch each other when they drink. In this juice they are meant to promote the point of

unity, which is represented in this calabash and this tree. As they drink it is acceptance. Let us swallow it. Of course this is done in front of the elders or the chief, who then give statements of covenant to ensure that this vow is never broken.

If the two sides are of different tribes they have another external symbol... that of the bent spears. The blades of these spears are bent down, and exchanged between each side. These spears remain constantly as a reminder... it plays a part like a written document, as a reminder that the two tribes have come to agreement and that they have restored their relationships. One historic event which happened: There had been this ceremony between the people of Acholi and the people of West Nile in 1983 or 1984 in the area of Paloro. These two groups had a really serious fight in the time of Amin. The elders of the two groups met in Paloro and performed this rite up to the level of bending the spears. Up to now the spears are still there. One of the chiefs who went to Juba reminded the people about it. He said, 'that spear is still there and now between us of West Nile and Acholi there is no war.' When there was an attempt by the Government to woo the people of West Nile to fight against people of Acholi, the leader said 'no, don't you see this (spear), we cannot do it. Instead we can go and talk and advise our brothers and sisters in Acholi that that fight must be settled, and must not go on like that.'

This (reconciliation) is one of the things that must be done communally. People must be given total peace so that they don't have fear that what they say may (cause) somebody (to) revenge on them. This atmosphere must be cleared so that people can feel secure, and talk of anything. This is why we encourage people to sit together to decide what must be done. Here, the roles of the chiefs are very important. The cultural leaders, our role as religious leaders, and the support by the government is very important, plus the



support of the sides who were fighting. Then people can talk and can decide who needs to be reconciled with who, and to ask them “how would you do it?” Even there in Juba there was signs. The leaders from Teso, Lango, Madi, Sudan, they all met, and agreed there must be reconciliation. Reconciliation must occur between the Acholi and their neighbors, then we Ugandans with the people of Sudan, and now, with the (Democratic Republic of the) Congo; later, the LRA with UPDF, then the Government with the population here, and so on. I think if it is done it will be a very big step forward for our nation - something like what South Africa did - to have the courage to look back at our history and let those who made the serious mistakes come out and make confessions. And for those who were the victims, let them too come out and say ‘we forgive you.’

Just last week we organized a workshop where people from Congo and from Sudan came. It was very interesting. The first atmosphere was one of aggression. People were very hot against those of Uganda. The people of Uganda were first quiet, with no response, just listening to their anger. After they stopped talking, one man from Uganda stood up and said, ‘Our sincere apology for what has happened. This was not our intention, to export our war to you. What you are suffering there we also suffered it here in Uganda. Now what we need to do is to see if the three of us can together find a solution to this problem. Let us put our minds together.’ That is very clear – the need for reconciliation with our neighbors.

And what of the heroes that arose from the struggles here? Will the children be able to draw lessons from them?

There were many of these people who were heroes... not only for peace things, but also, for example, in the area of health – people like Dr. Lukwiya. He fought to defend the people from Ebola... his last

statement before he died was ‘God, you made me a doctor, now I know I’m going to die. But let me be the last to die from Ebola. ‘ That was a very powerful statement. He died like a defender of the population here, against Ebola. To say, I’m ready to die in fighting against Ebola, but let me be the last. And God heard his prayer; indeed he was the last to die from Ebola.

Then you have teachers, who kept the flame of education on without salary, food and clothes... they kept on teaching. This needs to be a process in educating the children about this. These people who were heroes need to be looked at as a foundation of the rebuilding. I think this was something great to be admired. In the aspect of religion we had Catechists. Many were killed while remaining with the people; encouraging the people to bear the reality with courage. There were priests and sisters who were killed in service to the people. Father Raphael (Di Bari), in Pajule, for example, and many others; there were civil servants, men and women... many. Some organizations remained throughout this too. Dr. Corti and his wife (Lucille Teasdale) remained here at the hospital (Lacor.) There were those who wanted the hospital to be closed, and he said no. Lacor hospital remained throughout. These are the people I would be calling heroes. And the children need to be told these things.

So this needs to be the process: I think this generation needs to be helped in a very special way; through informed accounts of the history they should be helped to internalize this, to know how to be helped to recover from the trauma.

We are still struggling now for the total peace of the area.

- Archbishop John Baptist Odama
March, 2009

