

Chasing the Kony Story

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Introduction

On June 28th, 2006, The Times of London ran a frontpage photograph of a rather puzzled looking Joseph Kony, rebel leader of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). Advertised as the first ever interview the LRA leader had given, the headline read: "I will use the Ten Commandments to liberate Uganda". The writer of the article, a reporter named Sam Farmar, described his dramatic entry into the world of the LRA: "As we walk into the dark, airless jungle clearing after 12 days of increasingly arduous travel, I understand how Stanley must have felt when he finally tracked down Livingstone" (Farmar 28 June 2006). The person Farmar had found was of course very unlike the Victorian missionary. At last, a fearless reporter had ventured into the heart of darkness and found the elusive, Kurtz-like figure perpetrator of appalling acts for twenty years, creator of a community of brainwashed followers, inculcated with his bizarre bible interpretations. It was a great scoop.

In reality, the story was largely fantasy. I should know, having conducted the interview with Kony. The article was a gross misrepresentation of what happened and of what Kony said. Only marginally less misleading was the representation of the interview on television by BBC's flagship programme Newsnight. Both versions made no attempt to interrogate the myths about the LRA, but were content to replicate them. The key fact, that for the first time Kony had tried to communicate his point of view through the international media, was simply set aside in favour of a dramatic first person narrative, deemed to be necessary for communication with what were assumed to be ignorant and disinterested audiences. News became a story about the person who was reporting it. The lone journalist is actually fictitious, a protagonist invented by himself.

Having worked for many years as a journalist in various countries, I thought I was not naïve about the ways news is manipulated. However, the determination of reputable media establishments to depict the LRA only in a manner that echoes familiar tales of white adventurers in brutal Africa took me by surprise. Facts were simply set aside or invented without any apparent concern for conventional, journalistic ethics. This is the story of how the interview with Joseph Kony presented in Chapter 2 actually occurred. None of the media professionals in the story come out well – including me.

I did not set out to "chase the Kony story", although I inevitably became caught up in the endeavor, and took some pride in having 'won the race' to secure the first proper filmed interview with the rebel commander. When the idea was first mooted a year before during discussions with former LRA combatants, it did not seem a likely prospect. It occurred in large part because I came to know several key figures in the rebel movement in the course of my PhD fieldwork on the war and the peace negotiations. I wanted to use the interview to bring attention to the complexities of the situation, and hopefully move beyond superficial stereotypes. I have tried here to give as accurate account as I can - while still feeling rather bruised by the experience that made me quit working in television news. I contrast the events as I saw them with the fantastical representation in The Times. It is important to set the record straight, partly because the

significance of the interview has increased. Instead of being Kony's first effort to defend himself to an international audience, what he said to me may turn out to have been his only attempt to do so.

The chase

Up until 2006, Western journalistic encounters with the LRA high command had barely occurred. Although *The Times* article states that "this is the first interview Kony has given to a journalist" this is simply untrue. Several journalists had spoken to him in the 1990s. Sudanese journalists, for example, recorded Kony when the LRA first moved into Sudan. LRA escapees, however, had provided most information about Kony's ways – everyone knew the stories about prayer days, dozens of wives, breathtaking brutality and spirit possession. Admirers would mention his military foresight and occasionally jolly nature. Both enemies and supporters testified to his powers. But Kony had no voice. His deputy Vincent Otti was occasionally heard talking on the radio via satellite phone. Kony himself appeared in a few photographs and a low quality video snippet in the mid-1990s. He looked an unlikely monster with his dreadlocks and 'born to be wild' T-Shirt. Once in 2002, he was put on air, although it was never clear whether it really had been him. The mystery of the man was perfectly and forcefully upheld.

Scores of journalists writing about the war in Uganda fell for the narrative of a freakish conflict with a crazy figurehead. Western media latched onto a stereotype, that had been successfully perpetuated by Ugandan government propaganda. The LRA war, in the mind of the Western public, had become the ultimate horror story in which a gang of child soldiers was led towards darkness by a Bible-quoting psychopath. *The New York Times* described the LRA as "a drugged-out street gang living in the jungle with military-grade weaponry and 13-year-old brides. Its ranks are filled with boys who have been brainwashed to burn down huts and pound newborn babies to death in wooden mortars, as if they were grinding grain". (Gettleman 29 April 2007)

Before I first went to Uganda in 2005, I had heard about Kony's ambition to run the country according to the Ten Commandments. I had read that 20 percent of the population of northern Uganda had been mutilated by the LRA, and traveled to the region with trepidation. What I found was rather different. Having worked in the area for two decades, my academic supervisor Tim Allen of the London School of Economics (LSE) had been asked to conduct a study on the workings of the reintegration procedures for former LRA soldiers.¹ I came along to help. It was a time when yet another peace process had just failed and the International Criminal Court (ICC) had started investigating Uganda at the referral of the Ugandan government (Allen, 2006). We spent five months interviewing former LRA, UPDF soldiers, aid workers, families and teachers.

Some things we found were unexpected. There were not thousands of mutilated people, and the "drugged-out street gang" turned out to be Africa's only rebel force known for its shunning of drugs and alcohol. Some former LRA combatants did talk about the Ten Commandments, but none talked about Kony using them to liberate Uganda in the way that was later reiterated in *The Times* headline. In the interview, Kony himself did not

¹ See the outcome: Tim Allen and Mareike Schomerus. USAID/ UNICEF. "A Hard Homecoming: Lessons Learned from the Reception Centre Process on Effective Interventions for former 'Abductees' in Northern Uganda". Washington DC/ Kampala: 2006. Available at.

actually say it. Perhaps less surprisingly, streets for gangs turned out to be scarce in the bush of northern Uganda and southern Sudan. None of this takes away from the fact that terrible things have happened. Many of those we met had appalling physical and mental scars, and more than a million others were living cramped together like animals. We found people who had returned from the LRA who were confused and scared. Some of the former LRA fighters quite openly admitted that they would be prepared to go back to the LRA because they saw no hope at home. People interviewed also spoke about their troubles with the Ugandan army – abuses, threats and the de facto imprisonment in the camps.

One afternoon, Tim and I were taken to meet a group of former LRA commanders. We asked the usual questions: how long were they with the LRA, what rank had they acquired, how did they get back, did they have amnesty? The young men were talking openly while some other people listened. Yet when we walked back towards the car, the mood changed. One of the men handed Tim a note, requesting a private meeting. The young men wanted to tell us that life outside the LRA was tough, but they also wanted to know more about what was going on outside Uganda. What exactly was the ICC planning to do?

Over the course of the coming months, as I continued meeting with them, the men's admiration for Kony became obvious. They would casually allude to still having contacts with the LRA leadership, offering to put me in touch with the high command. In August 2005, I received a hand-delivered letter. It was signed by Vincent Otti, the LRA's second-in-command. He wrote that he hoped to tell me one day what the LRA was really all about. In the late summer of 2005, one of the young men told me that Otti wanted to talk to me. It did not make any sense. Why would he want to talk to me? It seemed like a scam. I heard someone laughing on the other end of the phone line. "I am Vincent Otti," the voice said.

It seemed ridiculously easy to get Otti on the phone. He was talkative, telling me how the LRA was doing in their camp and that they were moving around a lot. I asked where he was and why he wanted to talk to me. He knew about me, he said, from his men. His men had told him that I had information. He wanted to talk about the possibilities for peace, and he wanted to know more about the ICC. The ICC had not yet issued warrants for the LRA leadership, but rumours were rife that they existed. Otti did not know what the ICC involvement meant. His understanding was that he would be taken to a foreign location and executed. I suggested that I could meet him to talk in person. He said it could be arranged and yes, I could interview Kony, too.

Months went by in we spoke regularly, racking up hundreds of pounds in phone bills. My phone would beep at any given time to signal that I should call back - 3 am, in the afternoon, Sunday morning. For a long time I thought I was being taken for a ride. Occasionally, I received frantic text messages at night from the LRA camp, accusing me of working for the ICC. I never spoke to Kony, but in November 2005 was informed that a meeting would be possible soon. Much later, in the fall of 2006, I asked a member of the LRA why they allowed me in their camp to speak to the chairman. "Because you did not belong to an organization", he said. "Because you had no agenda". They had decided that I was no threat. They also expected useful advice on the ICC.

Agreements and delays

About six months after my initial conversation with Otti, Tim Allen received a phone call. A BBC reporter called Sam Farmar was on the line, asking whether Tim saw any possibility of making a connection to the LRA leadership. Having freelanced for the BBC before, I thought that it would be helpful to have a reputable news organization behind me and I liked the idea of working in a team. I agreed to meet Sam Farmar in December 2005.

Farmar told me that he had contacted Betty Bigombe, the former peace negotiator, a few times and was confident that he would be off to the bush soon to conduct an interview with Kony. I thought this unlikely. Bigombe is a remarkable person, but from my conversations with LRA commanders, it had become apparent that they were no longer willing to accept her as a negotiator or peace-talks facilitator. I knew it would be difficult to sustain my LRA connections if I became associated with her. So I told Farmar that, if it became likely that I would be able to meet Kony and film an interview, I would contact him. At that point, conducting the interview was a potentially dangerous and expensive endeavour. The LRA had crossed towards the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) under military pressure from Ugandan and Southern Sudanese troops. Meeting Kony would have likely involved hiring a private plane or even helicopter and flying to a meeting point under attack. Working with a BBC journalist seemed like a good set up – even if, as it turned out, he soon became a freelancer. And I liked Farmar's attitude. Like me, he was opposed to a reporter-led approach. He agreed that, if the interview with Kony became possible, we would make sure that it was properly contextualized, and that we would look behind the façade of LRA myths.

Editors like to see an intrepid reporter on camera. The reasoning goes that the journalist can draw in the viewer by going through an experience for them. That might be true. It might be easier for people in Britain or the United States to connect to the suffering in refugee camps if a reporter like Sorious Samura sets out to live there, personally experiences the plight of the people, and relates it to the camera.² It has been called “real reality TV” and the fact that Samura is Sierra Leonian gives him credibility to engage in the suffering.

But I did not think it was appropriate for me (or Farmar) to adopt this approach towards the LRA. Leaving aside the fact that we are both white and have not suffered anything like what Ugandans and Sudanese have had to go through, there had already been rather too much of that kind of reporting on the region. I was keen that the story should try to communicate the seriousness of what has been happening. The last thing I wanted was for misinformed conceptions of African barbarism to be contrasted with the rational and bemused gaze of the Western commentator.³ Farmar agreed, or at least said that he did.

There were always delays. In early 2006, Otti told me that the LRA was under attack and on the move. At times, he was not reachable for days. On February 12, Otti said that the

² Samura, Sorious. 'Living with Refugees - Surviving Sudan' *Dispatches* Channel 4/ Insight News (09-12-'04).

³ Janet Malcolm makes a valid point about the role of the first-person commentator in her excellent study of the relationship between journalists and their subject:

the 'I' character in journalism is almost pure invention... The journalistic 'I' is an over-reliable narrator, a functionary to whom crucial tasks of narration and argument and tone have been entrusted, an ad-hoc creation, like the chorus of Greek tragedy. He is an emblematic figure, an embodiment of the idea of the dispassionate observer of life. Nevertheless...among journalists, there are those who have trouble sorting themselves out from the Superman of their texts.

(Malcolm, Janet. *The Journalist and the Murderer*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983.)

LRA wanted to talk peace, but not before the Ugandan elections on February 23. He did not want peace talks to support President Museveni's election campaign. In early April, I received a phone call from someone I did not know. He asked to meet him and two LRA representatives in Nairobi. They would arrange a meeting with Kony, preferably in the Central African Republic. It was impossible to say whether this was going to happen, but travelling to Nairobi seemed vital. The contact stressed again that all of this was part of initiating peace talks.

I arrived alone in Nairobi on a Wednesday evening in late May 2006, not knowing what to expect. At the immigration queue, a massive TV was showing a news programme. I overheard the headline: "First pictures of Africa's most elusive rebel leader". A man who looked like the older version of the infamous Kony photograph, repeated that he was "not a terrorist". A meeting with Riek Machar, the Vice-President of the Government of Southern Sudan (GoSS) had taken place. Machar had handed Kony US-\$20,000 and had offered to act as a peace mediator. In the arrivals hall, I was met by four LRA representatives.

The atmosphere over the next few days was both courteous and full of distrust. Once we got in a car, they locked the doors and we took off to an unknown destination. I was undecided whether this was perfectly normal or utterly stupid of me. On the way, we stopped to buy Ugandan newspapers. The front page showed Kony and Otti, surrounded by the same men who were sitting in the car with me. I was about to find out that they were taking me to the racecourse to watch the horses.

Logistics were only slowly becoming clearer to me. I was told that we would fly to Maridi in Western Equatoria, Southern Sudan, and stay a night in an NGO compound. At the time, that seemed a ridiculous idea – how on earth was the LRA going to be allowed in an NGO compound? On May 30th, I was told that after the upcoming meeting, the high command would withdraw entirely to await the outcome of the peace negotiations. The main purpose of this trip was not that I could interview Kony. It was to solidify peace talks arrangements. Delegates seemed to be flying in from everywhere – the UK, the US, other African countries. The delegation was to be an eclectic mix of diaspora, LRA commanders and Gulu residents who would travel to meet Kony. Representatives from Pax Christi Netherlands, who had facilitated the Kony/Machar meeting and members of St. Egidio, an Italian organization, would travel as well. I called Farmar in London and told him to get on a plane. Farmar describes this lead-up in his article as having "it made it my mission to track down Kony, putting out feelers wherever I could". Knowing that I was organising everything from Nairobi, he could hardly have been that surprised when "finally, this month, I received a call from Nairobi: Kony would meet me".

That night, I was bombarded with text messages from Otti's number. He kept asking me who I was and where I was. When I told a member of the LRA delegation about it the next day, he said: "They are afraid that they might be betrayed".

The Road to Ri-Kwangba

Farmar's article in *The Times* speaks of "twelve days of increasingly arduous travel" to get to Kony. The truth is that, after leaving London on an overnight flight to Nairobi on May 31, he took a taxi to the four-star Jacaranda Hotel, had a leisurely tropical breakfast, a relaxing day in Nairobi and dinner by the pool. The next day, the delegation, the peacemakers, Farmar and I flew to Juba in Southern Sudan on a commercial flight. In

Juba, we were waved through immigration and treated as VIPs, like the rest of the official delegation.

We stayed in Juba until June 10th. The GoSS provided accommodation in a tented camp beside the River Nile, one of the few up-and-running camps at the time and arguably the best accommodation one could have in Juba. A tent usually cost \$100/night, but we stayed for free. When the camp filled with EU delegates, the LRA offered to share their accommodation with us. We stayed in air-conditioned container rooms, eating three meals a day at a total value of \$160/ day per person. To allow me privacy as the only woman, one LRA soldier moved out of his container. Farmar shared a room with others.

We spent most of our time sitting with cold drinks under a mango tree or playing pool in an air-conditioned tent. The biggest problem was ants falling from the tree onto the keyboard when using the WiFi. Evening entertainment came via a satellite flat-screen TV – we watched Germany beat Costa Rica in the opening game of the World Cup. The waiters were wearing printed T-Shirts: “World Cup 2006 – We support Sudan.”

Contrary to what the Times article conveys, the trip into Sudan did not revolve around ‘their’ reporter. Although Farmar states that “we waited for a week as the LRA men checked me out”, the waiting was unconnected to his presence. The LRA was relying on Machar to help them – and so were we, for that matter. Machar was providing security, logistics and the communication bridge to the Government of Uganda that everyone hoped would facilitate peace talks. Machar was held up on business in Khartoum.

In the absence of “the big man”, the LRA delegation met with local politicians and some aid organizations, being advised and challenged. The general mood was hopeful. The delegation felt that another meeting between Kony and Machar was a real achievement. At one point, they were trying to get Kofi Annan’s phone number to try to engage direct UN support. Kony cheered them on from afar. I was shown a text message that he had sent. „HEAVEN watches over its TREASURES and you’r one of its FINEST and most PRECIOUS,” Kony had texted. “Live your life knowing that GOD will never take His eyes off you! Am prayin 4 u all!”

One regular visitor to the LRA delegation was the Honorable Betty Ogwaro, Member of the Southern Sudan Legislative Assembly for the LRA-affected region of Magwi County. Ogwaro’s constituency had born the brunt of the Ugandan conflict. The LRA had been based there for over a decade, establishing a relationship marked by both violence and coexistence with the residents (Schomerus, 2007). As a representative of her community, she wanted answers from the LRA, but she also had the foresight to see what would turn out to be a great challenge in the peace process: “The LRA will need a lot of support so that others will accept that they are human beings,” she said. “We have to remember that the LRA have a reason to fight and that they deserve to be heard”. The main point, she said, was that “the LRA need to be capacity-built. They need a real tough negotiation team to navigate this. The government has a very well-trained team. Someone needs to teach the LRA how to keep up”.⁴

A few days after we had arrived in Juba, the town was gripped with excitement – a UN Security Council delegation had arrived to discuss Darfur with the President of Southern Sudan. Around lunchtime, several people of the UN press corps strolled into the hotel

⁴ Personal communication (08-06-’06).

compound and asked around for LRA members. Machar had let slip that the LRA delegation was staying there. It caused a quick debate in the LRA delegation whether it would be worthwhile to face the press or not. When asked, I advised against press exposure. It seemed premature, and the delegation was not ready to face a barrage of questions. I was also being self-serving. I did not want anybody to tag along, worried that a commercial media outlet would come up with the idea to offer Kony money for an interview.

The whole time we were waiting, I had the impression of being weighed up by the LRA delegation. At one point, Farmar and I were asked to present “our mission”. I said that we would attempt to represent the meeting with Kony and the peace talks in a fair way, and give the LRA a chance to explain their actions. We also told the delegation that we would not accept restrictions on our reporting, but that we would make sure that our video tapes and information were used responsibly. Ironically, given what was to occur subsequently, Farmar reiterated that we had signed a contract preventing use of the material without both of us agreeing, as a way of ensuring that it was used in an appropriate way. Members of the delegation told us after the discussion that it had been a test. They would have kicked us out if we had agreed to sign a deal with them. It would have shown that we could be bought.

The entire time, we were guests of the Government of Southern Sudan, although in The Times article, the power relations seem to have shifted. It becomes the journalist who paved the way for Machar: “Mr Machar announced that he would come with me to meet Kony. The next day, accompanied by 40 Sudanese security men, we boarded a charter flight to Maridi, the closest Sudanese airstrip to the Democratic Republic of Congo”. Machar and Farmar did board the plane on June 10th – along with 40 Sudanese soldiers, the LRA delegation, three peacemakers, several journalists who had been invited by Machar and Pax Christi, and me.

Machar usually travels with a cameraman and another Sudanese journalist came along. We were not worried about either of them. We arrogantly noticed that the cameraman’s equipment was by far inferior to ours and that he would not know how to feed to international outlets. The Sudanese writer seemed so inconspicuous he almost did not matter. We felt quite superior with our international knowledge and contacts. The presence of two Dutch journalists on the morning of departure, a writer and a photographer, was more worrying. They could scoop us by feeding both words and pictures within minutes if they had brought satellite equipment. The Dutch journalists also made the delegation nervous. They did not know them and their presence had not been cleared with the high command.

Some then argued that it was better if no journalist came on the trip. Months and months of work and hundreds of pounds in phone bills disappeared in front of my eyes. The last thing I wanted was for this to turn into a press conference with everyone rushing to their phones to call in quotes. I spoke privately to delegation members to reassure them that we would be able to deliver a proper piece for television and should be still allowed to meet with Kony privately. The LRA’s suggestion that everyone would cover the meeting, but that Farmar and I would interview Kony and spend the night at the camp seemed like a good solution.⁵ In retrospect, my protection of the exclusive

⁵ As a result of this set-up, the account of the meeting between Kony and Machar published in a Dutch paper and consequently the UK’s *Sunday Telegraph* was the first newspaper report to come directly from the

interview with Kony had further implications. The absence of other observers opened space for the encounter to be elaborated into a fantasy.

Arrival at the LRA camp

Having landed in Maridi we were greeted with tea and food at the compound of Care – who had offered assistance to the peace mission. Machar’s aides went off to organize cars. After four hours drive on a bumpy road, we arrived in Ibba, where the commissioner had prepared a warm meal and accommodation. A further two hours drive took us to Nabanga, located about six miles from Ri-Kwangba on the Sudan-DRC border.

What was reported in the Times article as “12 days of increasingly arduous travel” had come to an end. We were about to meet with Kony, an encounter that The Times made comparable to the famous meeting between Stanley and Livingstone. Given the way it was reported there was an unintended truth in that assertion. As several analysts have shown, Stanley’s account, which helped establish the convention of first person journalism, was itself fictional (see for example, Lindqvist, 1997; Dugard, 2003; Pettit, 2007).

Farmar tells us that after two days of further travel his satellite phone showed that we had crossed the border into Congo. We soon stopped and two LRA fighters armed with Kalashnikovs jumped in. Their eyes were blank and bloodshot, their hair in dreadlocks, strings of bullets hung around their necks. We looked at each other and said nothing.

In reality, the LRA fighters had been waiting in the SPLA barracks at Nabanga. Far from it being a chilling encounter with wild African Rastas, we, together with the delegation, were warmly met with cheers and smiles. It was disconcerting and unexpected rather than frightening.

The meeting between Machar and Kony took place in the afternoon of June 11th. Before we could reach the meeting point, we had to wait in a clearing. SPLA and LRA fighters were lounging about in the grass. Machar was talking to the county commissioner. It was my first time to come face to face with active and armed LRA fighters. One of them showed me his black wristband. “If I take this off, I die,” he said. “This is our culture in the bush, this is our life. Joseph put it on me eight years ago”. He was wearing a T-Shirt of the Ugandan army, probably bounty acquired after a fight. “Together in arms we shall succeed,” it read. His nails were varnished in red. I took his hand and asked him why he had painted his nails. He laughed. “That is life,” he said. All of a sudden, I burst into tears. It came out of nowhere and I walked to the side to hide it.

When Otti appeared, he greeted us courteously, taking my hand into both his hands. After all, we had spoken on the phone a lot. We then all marched into the bush, led by Machar who had without hesitation agreed to only take minimal security. The meeting was set up on make-shift bamboo benches with Kony and Otti seated on plastic chairs in a clearing. Nobody was allowed to take any pictures or roll a camera. The atmosphere of the meeting was not tense, but direct. The LRA had positioned three rings of security

LRA camp. (Koert Lindijer and Michael Hirst, "First sight of rebel leader in 20 years as he tries to broker deal to end bloodshed in Uganda," *The Sunday Telegraph* 18 June 2006.)

around the site with six soldiers standing directly behind Otti and Kony. Kony, sporting a blue beret and silver tassels, spoke very little. Otti did most of the talking in a hushed voice. None of the LRA soldiers showed any reaction. I caught the gaze of the soldier with the painted nails and he acknowledged it with an almost imperceptible nod in his eyes.

“Peace talks, “ said Machar, “are more difficult than war”.

Otti answered that he had heard on the radio that the LRA had two months to surrender, but that there was no sign of talking.

“Surrender is not my business, I don’t work for that, “answered Machar. “But you know what war does. You know what war did in our country. It is about who will win over the table, not who will defeat the other”.

Then Kony spoke: "We are committed to talk...to see peace in our country and South Sudan. Our people are ready. This time we want to see who is going to spoil this thing. We are waiting what is coming from your side. We are seeing you as our father, our negotiator. From our side, we are ready for everything”.

When Kony asked for time to consult with his delegation, the SPLA left and Farmar and I stayed behind for the night. Some LRA soldiers went to the cars and picked up our luggage, carrying our heavy bags and equipment through the bush. Kony disappeared and in the meantime, we were made to feel welcome as guests. The LRA served us food - fresh bread and chickpeas – and everyone chatted around the campfire. I sat down with Otti who was carrying some papers and a Lwo-English dictionary. “I need to learn,” he said. “Learning is always good”. He was reading Sudan’s Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA). Machar had brought three copies for the LRA to study. Other LRA members were reading as well, books such as “The Complete Idiot’s Guide to U.S. Special Ops Forces”, Tom Clancy’s “A Guided Tour of U.S. Army Special Forces” and Clausewitz’ “On War”. The choice of literature present in the LRA camp was puzzling, a strange mixture of boyish fascination with weapons and interest in iconic writing about European wars.

Otti explained to me the LRA symbol, which he had designed himself. It shows the crane, the national bird of Uganda, a star and half-moon and a heart with the Ten Commandments, surrounded by two palm branches symbolizing peace, he said. He explained how on Christmas 1985, his nephew was attacked by Museveni’s National Resistance Army (NRA) forces in his shop in Kampala. He was killed instantly and Otti packed up the next day to join the rebels in the bush. It was not the story I had heard about how Otti joined the LRA, but it was his story. Later on, the LRA doctor took me aside to tell me that he needed drugs for about 100 patients with malaria or various wounds. He had trained as a doctor 30 years ago in Mbale in Uganda, but had been in the bush since 1986.

The next morning, we were led into the next clearing to meet Kony, while Otti met with Machar to clarify the peace talks set-up. Incidentally, someone reported live from the Machar/Otti meeting via text messages. It must have been the Sudanese journalist to whom I had paid so little attention. Kony spoke more than eighty minutes. In the last ten minutes, Farmar asked a few questions while I took some cutaway shots with a second camera. We had agreed that we would both ask questions and Farmar had not asked

anything until I asked him if he wanted to add something. We finished the interview everyone gathered in another clearing. Kony was joking with the delegation. “Malaika asked me a lot of questions, she is very tough,” he said. “She asked me if I had child soldiers”.

Some members of the delegation had never been in the bush to visit the LRA, they were getting to know their leaders. Otti had taken off his gumboots and replaced them with flip—flops. Kony had changed from his blue T-Shirt into an ironed shirt. He gave a long speech in Lwo, saying that he was ready for peace – but if that was not going to work he was also ready to go to total war and to arm every child in Uganda. I moved to the side and started taking notes. A teenage boy approached me and asked what I was doing. “I am taking notes,” I said. “I am thinking”.

“Why are you thinking”?

“It is my job. It is the purpose of my job. What is the purpose of yours”? I asked.

“I forgot,” he said. “It is too big a question. I am only 15”.

Getting the news out

Upon leaving Ri-Kwangba, Farmar tended to business. He called UK broadcasters Channel 4 and BBC Newsnight to tell them that the interview had taken place. I did not pay much attention until I overheard him debating the interview on the phone with Newsnight’s commissioning editor.

“Yes, “ said Farmar. “He said that the Holy Spirit speaks through him and that God told him to fight this war”. And yes, he himself had conducted the interview. “But Mary, I am afraid it is not a reporter-led piece,” he said.

I was stunned. Kony had been very clear that God did not tell him to fight this war and that it was not the Holy Spirit that spoke through him, but spirits that spoke to him. He had only said that the Holy Spirit was with them. The difference did not seem to matter much. By the time we arrived back in London the next morning, BBC Newsnight had agreed to buy the piece and made a contract with my production company. I was about to learn how British mainstream media works.

At Newsnight, the commissioning editor greeted me with the words that she was “perturbed” that there were no shots of Farmar with Kony. She clearly had not been told by Farmar that we had agreed not to feature ourselves. In the end, I agreed to let Farmar read the script – it did not seem like such a big deal to me. In retrospect I gave in too quickly, not anticipated that the piece would still turn out to be told in the first person – even without the pictures. We were assigned a producer and Farmar stared on the script while I looked at archival footage previously shot in Uganda by the BBC. I had insisted on seeing the script every step along the way. I had also suggested certain parts of the interview that I thought should be included in the final piece.

One part that I did not include was when Kony addressed me by name to say “you are the first journalist to come to me in the bush like this”. In the BBC version, the sentence stayed, just my name was removed. Some of Farmar’s questions had been inserted by the

producer taken from the last bit of the interview, so that answers given to questions I asked seemed like a reply to Farmar. When I realized the extent to which the material was being manipulated,, I protested and was told that my objections would be taken on board. They were not.

If I was cross about the shift to a reporter led piece, words almost failed me when I first saw Farmer's draft script. He had called the LRA delegation "child-like" with "no formal schooling", described them as driven by a "mixture of distorted Christianity and brutality" and as "having manipulated the Bible for their demonic cause". He called Kony "messianic". I insisted on changes, including having "child-like" crossed out: it was an inaccurate description of grown-up men, many of which had been to school, condescending and not based on reality. However, Farmar recorded his original script. I was simply sidelined.

In the end, I sent a protest email to the commissioning editor, the producer and Farmar before the broadcast to request changes, listing the parts I found biased and not factual. I also pointed out that Kony did not, as expected, present himself as the messiah sent to fight this war. Instead he took full responsibility for what he had done, and defended it in a rational way. I also pointed out that the credit given to the reporter of the piece was incorrectly allocated to Farmar, and that if the statistics on abductions mentioned in the commentary were accurate, well over one million teenage boys would have been abducted by the LRA. The Newsnight team assured me that the script was being worked on "point by point". Somewhat mollified, I took a plane to Nairobi to connect to Juba to follow developments. The BBC report was not going to be the kind I had wanted, but I was sure that the errors and misrepresentations were being corrected. I was naïve.

When the Newsnight piece was broadcast, it was a jungle adventure story by lone journalist Farmar, thanks to careful editing of the questions and answers.⁶ It bore little resemblance to what had actually happened. After the piece, Newsnight host Jeremy Paxman welcomed Uganda's High Commissioner to the UK in the studio to reply to Kony's accusations against the government. Paxman pushed the High Commissioner to say that they should do "more" against the LRA. It was an easy point for the High Commissioner to agree with. None of the complexities – or indeed the common lore that the army quite liked to avoid direct battle with the LRA – were touched upon. Newsnight promoted the piece on their website: "Speaking in the jungle of the Democratic Republic of Congo, surrounded by some of what he estimates as 3,000 heavily-armed fighters, [Kony] insists he is not the monster he is portrayed to be"(Farmar 28 June 2006) One of the big mysteries of the peace talks remained how many LRA there were in the bush. Nobody had ever seen 3,000 fighters. To coincide with the BBC broadcast, it turned out that Farmar had also secretly arranged for the even more overly fictional account of our journey to meet Kony to appear in *The Times*. I read it in Juba, dismayed that editors of two of the world's major news outlets were

⁶ I found out about *The Times* article in Nairobi airport, along with the revelation that Farmar had been on the BBC World Service to explain whether Kony's denial of atrocities was true. His activities broke his contractual obligations, and after formal communications with my production company, on the June 28th, he agreed to not publish the material further. The December 2006 issue of *Harper's Magazine*, however, published a transcript "from an interview with Kony, conducted last June in Congo by Sam Farmar" (Farmar, December 2006: Interview: Spirit in the Bush', Harper's). Harper's Associate Editor apologized to me and wrote that Farmar had "maintained that he had asked the questions presented in the transcript we published, which he approved before publication. We acted in good faith, relying on Farmar's previous credits with the *Times* and the BBC" (personal email Christian Lorentzen to Mareike Schomerus, 17-12-'07). Farmar states that the oversight must have been with Harper's.

happy to judge and to only published what they wanted to hear – although Peter Barron writes on the Newsnight homepage that “our aim [is to] always to question the way things are” (Barron 23 January 2005). The same journalists who so readily latch on to the freakishness of Kony’s spirit communication see no problem in calling him ‘evil’. Calling someone ‘possessed by the forces of the devil’ seems an acceptable category in supposedly level-headed journalism, using notions of Christian spirituality in every-day news coverage.

Among analysts of Uganda and southern Sudan, the broadcast and article were sources of disappointment and even outrage – for two reasons. One was personal: colleagues who were aware of how I had obtained the interview with Kony felt that I had been treated badly. The other related to the inaccurate news content of the report and to the questionable representation of the material as a heroic journey into darkest Africa. Without my knowledge at the time, numerous formal complaints were made to the BBC. The stated policy of the BBC is that “our commitment to our audiences is to ensure that complaints and enquiries are dealt with quickly, courteously and with respect” (British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), 2005).⁷ None of the people who have told me that they submitted complaints ever received a direct reply or an acknowledgement. There were some informal, emailed responses from Newsnight editors, some of which are quoted below. But these only occurred after the director of the Royal Africa Society had communicated personally with Jeremy Paxman.

Newsnight’s reaction to the controversy about the broadcast was defensive. Referring to the formal complaints that the interview with Kony had been edited to disguise the identity of the person asking the questions, host Jeremy Paxman wrote to senior editor Peter Barron, that the accusation was

extremely serious. If these accusations are true they point up the danger of buying in pieces from people unfamiliar with our standards. If they're bogus, he'd better have a decent libel lawyer. I only hope they're untrue. Otherwise, I think we're in the poo.⁷

In an internal email Barron then wrote that

I think we need to concede that we could/should have been clearer that this was a joint enterprise, and that ‘we’ would have been better than ‘I’, but that is a stylistic point rather than one of substance of dodgy journalism. (It will help greatly if Mareike's name did appear on the credits - it does on the running order I hope the credits did run, and we can also point out that Farmer himself never appears). The fabrication point is much more serious and as I understand it there is no question but that he was there and he did ask the questions contemporaneously on tape - but this needs to be carefully checked.⁸

It would have been easy for Peter Barron to find out that the questions were not asked ‘contemporaneously’, but were inserted into the broadcast interview. Yet in one informal reply to an official complaint, Barron wrote:

I was very concerned to hear these accusations about Newsnight's journalism, and have carefully checked the facts of the matter. I am

⁷ (Personal email Jeremy Paxman to Peter Barron, 03-07-'06).

⁸ (Personal email Peter Barron to Mary Wilkinson/ Rachel Thompson, 05:07:'06). With this internal email, Barron adhered to the basic rules of TV journalism that state that "what is not permitted is separating questions from answers... to make the reporter's or producers' editorial point clearer" (Westin, 2000).

convinced that these very serious criticisms of Sam Farmar's report are both inaccurate and unfair. I'd first like to deal with the most serious allegation that the Kony interview with Sam Farmar was fabricated. The suggestion that Kony and Otti did not do an on-camera interview with Sam Farmar and that his questions were later dubbed in the UK is both untrue and libelous.⁹

Essentially the Newsnight position was that the two journalists who had brought the piece to them had now had a falling out, and that this was not something for which the BBC should take any responsibility.

Upon my return to Sudan, I found myself in a difficult situation. The LRA felt betrayed. It was partly a question of honour. Nobody was upset about the atrocities mentioned, it was not about glossing over the brutal reality of war or even war guilt. They had asked to be treated fairly, rather than being portrayed as mindless freaks. I was yelled at and accused of two-facedness. One night, an LRA fighter grabbed me in a dark alley and asked me for the video tapes. Could I assure that they were not going to The Hague to be viewed by the ICC? Since Farmar had refused to return the original footage after the broadcast, I said that I could give no guarantees. The LRA commander underscored his threat to my security by choking me.

It was cringe-worthy and embarrassing to be asked about the article in Sudan, especially by those who had been part of the “dangerous journey” into the bush. A few weeks after the publication, just before the opening of the peace talks in Juba in July 2006, Machar traveled back to Ri-Kwangba to convince Otti to come back to Juba to be on the delegation. Otti let him wait for two days. Machar, seated in a forest clearing and reading Stephen Hawking’s “A Brief History of Time”, at one point looked up and let his gaze wander over the Reuters correspondent, the camera crew from Al Jazeera, the stringer for AFP and myself and then said: “Well, at least we can now all be like Stanley about to meet Livingstone”.

A consequence of the BBC and The Times representation was that it became the only accepted narrative, quite simply ‘the truth’. I learned this after having taken the material to German Public Broadcaster ARD and their flagship foreign affairs programme “Weltspiegel”. When I submitted the manuscript, there were some minor changes requested and the manuscript signed off with the editor’s remark that the piece would “decorate the programme well.”¹⁰ My version of the meeting with Kony was a lot less dramatic, and focused on the war, rather than the people involved. The broadcast was scheduled for July 2, 2006, a few days after the Newsnight broadcast.

I was back in Juba when a German colleague called me and told me that the piece was not being broadcast. This was unusual – if there is a problem after signing off, an editor will usually get in touch with the reporter. But I had heard nothing. I tried getting in touch with the editors to find out if this was an oversight, but reached nobody. I asked my colleague to follow up. She managed – and was told after seeing the BBC coverage of the interview, ARD started to have doubts about my version of the story. Eventually I was told that I would have to rework the piece in the style of the Newsnight report. I was unwilling to do so, and the piece has never been broadcast.¹¹

⁹ (Personal Email Peter Barron to Richard Dowden, July 6, 2006)

¹⁰ (Personal email, my translation).

¹¹ I published an article about the interview in Germany’s Weekly Die Zeit. (Mareike Schomerus, "Die Geißel seines Volkes (The Scourge of his People)," *Die Zeit* 13 July 2006 2006.)

A few months later, I received a communication from Newsnight's senior editor, Peter Barron. He wanted to enter the Kony piece for the Royal Television Society Awards. He explained that,

given the controversy at the time it went out I want to make sure you are not unhappy about this and get the credit you deserve. The piece will be included in our general entry, but I would also like to enter Sam Farmar in the young journalist category.¹²

I did not agree the piece to be entered into any awards. The award for international news went to ITV for a story on China.¹³

Journalism and abuse of trust

After the fall out with the BBC and the Times and my gathering of the humiliating reactions back in Sudan, I tried to dissect why things had gone wrong. Doubtless it was partly because I did not assert my views strongly enough. But I was also uncomfortable about something else. I felt that I had let down someone who in the eyes of most does not deserve to be treated with decency. I had told my LRA contacts and their commanders that I wanted to portray them fairly. That was true, but I also said it because it was the obvious thing to say. It is the journalist's (or the researcher's) oldest trick to make someone "open up". Malcolm calls this combination of trust-gaining and setting the agenda an inherently "unhealthy" relationship between journalist and subject. "The moral ambiguity of journalism lies not in its texts, but in the relationships out of which they arise – relationships that are invariably and inescapably lopsided" (Malcolm 1983). I had managed to get to the LRA and gain their trust by promising them fairness – fairness that critics liked to call bias.¹⁴ And I had let them down.

I had sat down with Kony, shared food from the same plate, and joked with him. Before I left, someone took a picture of us. Just before the click of the shutter, Kony put his hand on my shoulder. The picture shows him, standing behind me like a well-meaning friend, squeezing my shoulder. It is an adequate depiction of his treatment of me – courteous, with some curiosity and bemusement. I am clutching my own hands and am barely mustering a tortured smile. I find it hard to show the photograph to anyone.

After the trip, I did not sleep properly for weeks. In my dreams, I was running away from burning villages. I woke up imagined phone beeps, signaling a text messages and request to call. I found myself stranded in the grey area of humanity, confused by my own experience as a reporter. Yet does it actually matter who asked the questions? Not at all. Thus I found myself in an impossible position. I had not wanted to make a big deal out of the scoop in the first place – so why defend it now? And what really was the achievement that I wanted to defend? That I could walk around claiming that I had been the only one to gain the trust of Kony so that he would talk to me?

¹² (Personal email Peter Barron to Mareike Schomerus, 08-11-'06).

¹³ In March 2007, I received yet another call from Newsnight. Amnesty International, Newsnight's Commissioning Editor Wilkinson said, had asked to enter the Kony piece for their journalism awards. She was furious when I declined again, and simply could not understand what my objections might be.

¹⁴ One example is David Chappel, Deputy Managing Editor of The Times. He reacted to criticism that the Times article had not covered the humanitarian catastrophe in the camps in the following way:

the difference in views between you and Mr Farmar on the portrayal of the humanitarian conflict in Uganda is a matter of objectivity and perhaps arises from your different approaches - one more academic than the other. Again that is opinion, not fact, and therefore not a matter for 'The Times'" (personal email David Chappell to Mereike [sic] Schomerus, 04-08-'06).

While the attitudes of the reporter and editors I dealt with still puzzles me, it is the fact that the analysis of the story will now always be the story of the dangerous journey to the mad man that still angers me. If the first major Kony interview had been published contextualized, who knows, it might have put positive pressure on the peace process. Maybe it would not have taken months – the best part of 2006 - for the international community to support the talks. Maybe the LRA would not have wasted so much time negotiating for their dignity on the negotiation table. It is impossible to say whether fair publicity would have convinced Kony to walk out of the bush in the spring of 2008 to sign the Final Peace Agreement (FPA), rather than all but disappear from the peace process.¹⁵

I was incredibly angry at myself for not being able to publish fair coverage that might help shift the standard parameters towards an engagement with the real issues of war – the issues of politics and violence and suffering and human rights, for everyone involved. The task had not been to become the LRA's or the SPLA's spokesperson. Both do their own PR. There was not a need for them to be pleased with the coverage. But the standard of reporting ought to have been reasonably accurate without facts being jiggled around to make them fit the pre-conceived storyline just that little bit better. Significantly the LRA were not particularly bothered by the inaccuracy of facts about abductions and killing. They felt insulted because Farmer portrayed himself as more engaged than he was. They also wanted to know why it had turned out to be a story that made the attempts at peace look ridiculous. In September 2006 Santo Alit, one of the commanders guarding the LRA assembly area, invited me for a cup of tea and explained that he thought this was like the biblical story of Jacob and Esau. Jacob deceives his father to receive the blessing that should have been Esau's. Someone you trusted betrayed you and deceived others into receiving praise, Alit said.

I learned that the LRA's understanding of trust and betrayal, of accountability and culpability, of right and wrong are complex, but not simply unreasonable. Kony denied the atrocities, but what else would anyone expect? Other things he said give insight into the inner workings of this war, into the intense personalization of the war parties, the protection of the LRA through the spirit world, the ambiguous role of international organizations that have done too little or the wrong things, even in the eyes of the LRA, as can be read in the interview in Chapter XXXX. These points were simply lost in coverage that aims to avoid complexity.

It is impossible to attempt to establish anything that resembles 'the truth' about the LRA war. Yet even attempt at factual accuracy are not aided by the media's hypocritical hunger for the exotic. In the end, the LRA war will most likely forever be perceived in terms of the dominant discourse about it. The 'real' Kony story, however much we chase it, is elusive. It will remain a tale about an imaginary journey - a bite-sized narrative with a white hero and an African villain.

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¹⁵¹⁵ The LRA has always followed media coverage closely. The more one-sided it has been, the more defiant - and usually violent - they have been.

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