

Community Peace Building and Reconciliation: A Case Study of Peer Support in Pajule



**Justice and Reconciliation Project
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Cover: Former LRA Major Onekomon Ki-koko is received back by a community member in Pajule

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Introduction

Simon Watmon was abducted as a young father of two small children by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in 1996. After 5 years and at the rank of a junior commander, he risked everything to return home via Sudan. Settled back in Pajule, he encountered many of the same challenges faced by all those who escaped: poverty, stigma and rejection by his family. Rather than be defeated by these, Simon emerged as an informal leader amongst his peers and is today recognized as a peace builder at the community level.

This Field Note documents the experience of Simon. It is a case study of how former Lord's Resistance Army captives are not just victims, but can also be agents of social change and reconciliation. His story is illustrative of previous JRP reports: *With or Without Peace: Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration in northern Uganda* and *Sharing the Burden of the Past: Peer support and self help among former Lord's Resistance Army youth*.¹ These two reports offered insights into the challenges currently faced by returning combatants and how a peaceful and successful disarmament demobilization and reintegration (DDR) process, and coping with the devastating

impact of the twenty year conflict in Northern Uganda, could take place.

Current policy frameworks including the Juba peace talk's agreed-points on accountability and reconciliation and DDR have set the stage for consideration of various accountability modalities; the Ugandan government is working to fulfill its commitment to "promote national legal arrangements consisting of formal and non-formal institutions and measures for ensuring justice and reconciliation with respect to the conflict".²

However past research suggests that practical emphasis needs to be put to involve formerly abducted persons in implementing the Juba agreements. Three main reasons exist to support this argument.

First, formerly abducted persons bring a unique perspective on the conflict based on their experiences that can be of great value in helping other former captives to move forward. Unless their involvement in the reconciliation process is encouraged, there is a risk that this perspective will be lost.

Secondly, there is a high level of stigma leveled against formerly abducted persons within the communities. Non-abducted members of communities often hold negative views about formerly abducted persons, including the belief that they are responsible

¹ These are part of a series of the Justice and Reconciliation Project Field Notes (7th and 8th Field Notes respectively)

² Excerpt from Agreement On Accountability and Reconciliation Between The Government of the Republic Of Uganda and The Lord's Resistance Army/Movement, 2008, Juba, Sudan

for, or complicit in, the crimes and atrocities committed by the LRA.³ However, formerly abducted persons hold deep trust amongst each other that puts them in an excellent position to be community level peace builders and advocates.⁴ This can be built on to increase the impact of community level peace initiatives.

Thirdly, peer support groups composed of formerly abducted persons provide the social networks needed to foster community peace. Peers, because of their common experience and trust shared, are well placed to play a role in confidence building, economic reintegration (including provision of livelihoods and microfinance), social inclusion, community reconciliation, psychosocial development, cultural education and reconnection.

Method

JRP carries out participant observation with camp residents. Stories that demonstrate particular community level justice and reconciliation issues are documented into case studies. This story of Simon Watmon was compiled through a series of in-depth interviews conducted between April 2007 to May 2009.

Simon was first identified as an individual who faced considerable challenges reintegrating into his community. His story was identified as one that demonstrates the impact an extended absence in the bush has on a formerly abducted person's family ties; and of how these are pivotal in the

reintegration and healing process. Further extensive engagement with Simon and with people who worked closely with him revealed more insights into this case.

About Simon

Simon Watmon was born in Pajule in Pader District, northern Uganda. He was raised by his mother, having lost his father before birth. He lived his early life in the war torn Northern region of the country. At the age of 27, he was married, later having two children. At the age of 30, he was abducted from Pajule on the 11th, October 1996 and stayed in abduction until 14th, May 2001.

We experienced Simon as a calm personality, and a good communicator both verbally and emotionally who seems to engage seriously with those around him. He is a skilled musician. Now eight years after returning to his community, his contribution as a peace builder is widely recognized.

Simon now operates a small shop in Pajule camp that has enabled him to earn a living. CARITAS provided him with a small capital base which he used to buy clothes from Kampala and bring them to Pajule. This shop has expanded and is Simon's source of income today. He also has a new wife with whom he now has two children but continues to live with and care for his two children from his first marriage.

³ See *Alice's Story: Cultural and Spiritual Dimensions of Reconciliation in Northern Uganda*. Justice and Reconciliation Project, Field Note No. 1, February 2006.

⁴ See *Sharing the Burden of the Past: Peer support amongst former Lord's Resistance Army Youth*. Justice and Reconciliation Project and Quaker Peace and Social Witness, May 2008.



*Simon Watmon in Pajule-photo by JRP
(March 2009)*

Abduction experience

Simon was abducted during a period of heightened insecurity in northern Uganda. He and his family, like much of the rural population, had been forced into an internally displaced people's camp. They lived in Pajule camp on a plot of land given to them by a family friend behind the Pajule parish mission. On the night of October 11th, 1996, as people were recovering from the Independence Day celebrations, Pajule camp was attacked. Simon explains; "I was abducted together with my friend who had invited me to sleep in his hut. The rebels came, broke into the hut and forced all of us out."⁵

⁵ Interview conducted with Simon, Pajule Camp, 27th, April 2007.

Together with other abductees, they were forced to walk to Sudan. Their shoes were taken away from them and they marched barefooted with heavy loads and swollen legs, over rocks, along unclear trails through thick brush and across over-flowing rivers. Some drowned in rivers along the way, most commonly women and children who could not swim. "It was difficult to cross the rivers. You would see people drown and curse why you were born"⁶ Simon recalls.

Simon spent most of his time as an abductee at a Lord's Resistance Army base in Sudan. This base doubled as a camp where the commanders' 'wives' were settled and where administrative work was conducted.

They took us to a place called Jebilen where there were so many huts. It was actually a residential place. We were welcomed and made to meet some of our relatives and friends who had been abducted earlier.⁷

According to Simon, the abductees suffered considerable hardships. In addition to constant hunger, and frequent and brutal punishment, illness was rampant in the camp. When periodically running out of food, many abductees resorted to eating wild fruits, which often led to abdominal problems. The camp also suffered a cholera outbreak as a result of the unhygienic environment and crowded conditions in the camp. Fortunately, during this time there was no military action and the base was spared any attacks from other combatant groups.⁸

⁶ Interview conducted with Simon, Pajule Camp, 17th April 2007.

⁷ Interview conducted with Simon, Pajule Camp, 17th, April 2007.

⁸ In Sudan, the Lord's Resistance Army was frequently attacked by the Sudan's People's Liberation Army. Also the years 2003/2004 were marked by the 'Operation Iron Fist' launched by the Uganda People's Defense Force against the Lord's Resistance Army.

The Lord's Resistance Army enforced a strict set of norms. Simon noted one; "we would not eat mutton or sheep meat because it was against Kony's spiritual works. It was believed that if one ate mutton, they would get weak and killed hence the sheep was a bad omen."⁹ Punishment was meted out for any violation of these norms.

Many abductees formed close relationships with those that shared their plight. While these relationships often helped abductees to cope with their suffering, they could also be a useful basis for fostering social healing:

I had a very nice girl friend. I was so upset when she was killed because she could not walk any further. This left me lonely and stressed. Everyone joked about her being my wife which even made us closer. I remember the time that I had to tell her to adjust her clothing since it was torn and exposing her nudity. It was great sharing with her. I don't believe there was anything she did that I didn't know about.¹⁰

The fact that formerly abducted persons carry this kind of attachment to each other can be important in interventions directed at fostering confidence and cooperation between communities and other formerly abducted persons. This is especially important in an environment where communities are reluctant to accept formerly abducted persons upon their return.

Repatriation

"I kept looking forward to the day I would escape."¹¹

Simon stayed in Sudan throughout his time of abduction and only moved to the Uganda-Sudan border when escorting troops to

Uganda. On the 14th of April 2001, Simon Watmon and another man escaped while the rest of the group slept in their Sudan base.¹² This happened just a day after twenty abductees had escaped and were attacked brutally by the LRA, killing at least two of them as they fled. After such an incident, no one thought any other abductees would try to escape immediately. Simon and his colleague braved this highly tensed environment and made their attempt. In the late hours of the night, they escaped from amidst the camp of sleeping soldiers. As they struggled to find their way home, Simon and his companion regularly approached civilian populations for help while avoiding military personnel.¹³

We left our guns at our escape base and ran to a place called Insidro carrying only grenades with us. After moving for some distance, we got tired and hungry. We found honey in some place but left it since we feared that we would be bewitched and so we did not harvest it. We continued with our movement until we reached a place that had people who belonged to the Lutugu tribe.¹⁴ We found them drinking and went to them explaining that we had escaped from the Lord's Resistance Army and so they welcomed us and gave us seats. We then asked them to help take us back to Uganda.¹⁵

At this point, Simon and the other escapee were introduced to the chief of the Lutugu people. They were welcomed warmly and given food, water and civilian clothes so that they would no longer have to wear their military uniforms. Because of the confidence

⁹ Interview with Simon, Pajule Camp, 11th October 2007.

¹⁰ Interview with Simon, Pajule camp, 27th April 2007.

¹¹ Interview with Simon, Pajule camp, 14th May 2009

¹² The Lord's Resistance Army maintained a camp base at a place called Jebelen in southern Sudan

¹³ At the time in question, the (northern) Sudanese government army was in close collaboration with the Lord's Resistance Army. .

¹⁴ The Lutugu have a degree of kinship to some of the tribes in North-Eastern Uganda and this made them more familiar and safe to approach.

¹⁵ Interview with Simon, Pajule Camp, March 2009.

they had gained in these people, they could eat the food without fear.¹⁶

From the Lutugu people, Simon and his colleague were taken to the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA). Suspected of being LRA commanders, they were held under observation until UNICEF intervened, reuniting them with other former captives and returning them to Uganda. Simon and his colleague recognized some of the former captives and were astonished as they never imagined that they would meet again.

It was a very joyful and painful reunion for us because we feared most of them were dead. We cried, ate, drank and danced. We were then shown pictures of those that had earlier stayed at the centre and had been taken back to Uganda.¹⁷

These comments clearly indicate that formerly abducted persons are eager to reunite with each other outside of captivity and that these reunions will evoke strong feelings of joy and common bonds.

Simon and some of the other abductees were flown to Entebbe by UNICEF. Simon recalls that they were warmly welcomed at Entebbe airport by representatives of the Uganda People's Defense Forces and of the Uganda Amnesty Commission. Vehicles were waiting for them at the airport. They were interviewed by both white and black journalists, primarily about the Lord's Resistance Army's stocks of ammunition.

Simon's personal recovery

When Simon returned from captivity, he stayed at a reception centre in Pajule run by the Catholic Archdiocese's CARITAS division

¹⁶ Many LRA escapees feel very uncertain of the reception they will encounter on escaping into civilian communities.

¹⁷ Interview with Simon, Pajule camp, 27th April 2007.

for a period of one week before he went home. Simon was welcomed through the "nyono-tong gweno" ceremony.¹⁸ Even within displacement camps, cultural leaders and women had adapted rituals to welcome the returnee home. These rituals are also important to remove *cen*¹⁹, *spirits of the dead* that are believed to bring sickness and death to the carrier and his or her close relatives, or lead to abnormal behavior. For the majority of returnees, this has had a therapeutic effect, especially for those with a good understanding of the rituals involved.²⁰



Elders performing a cleansing ceremony

To Simon, this was of great help as it relieved him of the recurring nightmares he suffered related to his time in captivity. He was

¹⁸ A traditional ceremony performed to welcome those who have stayed away from home for a long period of time. An egg is stepped to cleanse the returnee of the evil that he got involved in during his time in diasporas.

¹⁹ Misfortune and illness that come about as a result of spiritual vengeance after an offence has been committed against someone

²⁰ See *Roco Wat I Acoli; Restoring Relationships in Acholi Land: Traditional approaches to Justice and Reintegration*. September, 2005. Liu Institute for Global Issues, Gulu District NGO Forum, Ker Kwaro Acholi.

conscious of being vulnerable to spiritual haunting having been exposed to culturally forbidden acts such as walking over dead bodies without paying them due respect. “Today I live without any outstanding trauma just like the rest of the people who were never abducted”²¹ says Simon.

On arrival, Simon learned his wife had left home and abandoned their children. They had been left in the care of his elderly mother, who struggled to survive on assistance from humanitarian agencies. Simon began to care for his children on his own. His newfound status as a single parent and the loss of his marital status made it difficult for him to adapt to life in the community.

“I was married at the time I was abducted, so I was scared of going back home and start a living from scratch without my family and wife.”²²

In a community where most households have lost at least one member to abduction, Simon feared that he would be resented by the members of the community whose family members had been abducted but had not returned. Simon recalls many people looking at him with envy as they thought of their own children whose fates were still uncertain.

When I went back home, I was afraid. Many of the people had been abducted and only a few had returned leaving many of the families in agony. I had already been warned at the reception centre about the resentment that I would face from the people at home and this kept me in fear. I remember refusing to shake hands with a lady because she had a missing son in the bush. She came to see me and talk to me but I could not shake her hands. I feared that I would be bewitched.²³

Simon coped by at first keeping a distance from people who he felt exhibited bad

attitudes towards formerly abducted persons, and the sensitization campaigns run by humanitarian agencies encouraging communities to reconcile. He later got a US \$13 per month job at CARITAS reception center providing the basic necessities to take care of his family.

Community Peace Building

As a gateman at CARITAS Pajule center, Simon observed the fear of other returnees as they came back. They were suspicious of being blamed and persecuted. For example, when one of the local chiefs tried to mobilize formerly abducted persons in the hope of helping them to receive assistance from the Catholic parish, most of them were hesitant. They looked at such initiatives with doubt and fear that they would be identified and tortured. Rwot Oywak, the traditional chief of Pajule Sub-county, who had an existing friendship with Simon, decided that Simon might be better positioned to mobilize other formerly abducted persons.

This was the beginning of Simon’s involvement in community peace building. Rwot Oywak tasked him with mobilization of the formerly abducted persons.

At the start, the returnees were afraid to go to CARITAS but when I explained to them the benefits that CARITAS could offer us, they all turned up. They appointed me to be in charge of the returnees making me responsible for mobilizing them.²⁴

Simon used existing community structures to undertake his task: he consulted with local councilors and asked them to be responsible for mobilizing the people within their jurisdictions whenever they would be needed at the Pajule Parish mission.

Also with the support of the local leaders, Simon often spoke publicly about peace and

²¹ Interview with Simon, Pajule camp, March 2009

²² Interview with Simon, Pajule camp, April 2007

²³ Interview with Simon, Pajule camp, 11th October 2007.

²⁴ Interview with Simon, Pajule camp, April 2007.

reconciliation. The leaders would arrange for Simon to address the rest of the camp to pass on messages that encourage forgiveness and reconciliation within the community. It was also hoped that messages to the community would be passed on to others still in the bush to encourage them to escape and return.

From late 2002 to early 2005, Pajule was highly insecure. During this time, many people were abducted from Pajule. A number of them escaped with guns leading the LRA to attack the camp to recover their arms. Their escape also caused fears that LRA secrets would be revealed to the government, so the LRA attempted to hunt down escapees and kill them. One attack was on 23rd February 2002 when over fifty people were abducted from the Pajule CARITAS reception center; and another on the 10th October 2003 when over 700 people were abducted from Pajule camp. This can be rated as one of the single greatest abductions in the course of the LRA war in Northern Uganda.

Many of the workers at CARITAS Pajule center abandoned their work, as appalled and frightened at LRA targeting re-abduction of the children at the reception center. Simon put his life at risk by persisting with his work and staying at the centre despite being one of the targeted formerly abducted persons. Simon's dedication to his work and to the recently returned people can be attributed to his own experience as an abducted person.

Simon's role at the centre changed to that of mentor as he proved to be skilled at counseling formerly abducted persons. According to Simon, his leadership experience while in captivity prepared him for community leadership and informed his work with formerly abducted persons. He insists however that his prime motive is getting formerly abducted persons together and helping them to build peace and access aid. Simon also explained further his motivation at work:

I have a strong feeling for my country. I shall not allow seeing people suffering in my presence. I shall do anything to enable my country to live peacefully.²⁵



Photo; Newly returned women and children at CARITAS center-2001

Simon's work with other returnees

Pajule experienced several instances of voluntary Lord's Resistance Army demobilization when groups of rebels would return together. These initiatives were spearheaded by the local leaders, the political leaders, and members of the cultural institution, or traditional leaders. The leaders, through a variety of public and covert information channels, encouraged local rebel commanders to return home; and when convinced, rebel groups communicated interest in returning back home through their community based networks. Such information was then passed to the local leaders. Formerly abducted persons such as Simon also played a role in these initiatives. This, however, was done with reservation as there was need for caution regarding their security.

As Simon became more absorbed into CARITAS Pajule reception centre, he became

²⁵ Remarks by Simon, Interview conducted in Pajule camp, May 2009.

instrumental in welcoming new arrivals. In 2002 he was involved in receiving back the most senior commander to return back through Pajule: Major Onekomon Ki-koko who returned together with sixteen other foot soldiers (fourteen males and two females). When their interest in return was first made known to the community, it was received with mixed feelings. Some were excited, hoping that this was the genesis for the return of peace. However many were doubtful. “Many people suggested that Simon be part of the team that would receive back this commander right from the bush while others considered it risky for a returnee, being the first case of a commander to return back through Pajule.”²⁶

A team comprising the cultural leaders in the company of the Paramount Chief of Acholiland; His Highness Rwot Onen Achana II; the Local Councilor IV for Kitgum District, Mr. Oryem Charles; members of the Amnesty Commission; army commanders and some other local leaders, were brought together to receive back Major Onekomon Ki-Koko in Lapul village.²⁷

On the 25th, October 2001, Major Onekomon Ki-koko was received by the organized team and brought to CARITAS Pajule reception centre. It was an occasion that filled the camp with delight. Because of the overcrowded reception center, some people were forced to climb trees to enable them see the returned commander.

It was decided that Simon would be an agent of confidence building at the reception centre. This was aimed at instilling in the new returnees the assurance that things will happen the way that they are comfortable with. Simon was taken to speak with the returned group. He was asked to explain to

them how he was welcomed home and how he had managed to adjust to life in the IDP camp.

Simon was invited by Rwot Oywak to welcome back the Major and his team. Simon had known Ki-koko in the bush: “We went looting food together and there were times when we were in the same team escorting other teams to the border.”²⁸ Due to their common experience Simon was able to fulfill this role in a way that would have been impossible for a non-abducted person.

When he arrived at the scene, Onekomon Ki-koko embraced him, commenting; “Simon, it’s you!” Many appreciated from that point that returnees are ideal agents for reintegration.²⁹ Confidence building by formerly abducted persons is certainly necessary for the newly returned into the communities to count to them their experiences.³⁰

I have always engaged in counseling formerly abducted persons both at the centre and in the communities. Sometimes I would also be taken to go out to speak to the formerly abducted persons who have just come back home. We needed to build their confidence and this was only possible when they could interact with formerly abducted persons who could testify to them.

Some commanders who return or try to return home fail to effectively reintegrate and then opt to go back into the bush. Simon remembers instances of returnees finding their way back into the bush when they could not reintegrate; a threat for continued insecurity. In 1993, it was alleged that over 600 Lord’s Resistance Army members had gathered at Ot-otwilo village in Pader District seeking to come back home. Constant attempts to negotiate return with leaders seem

²⁶ Interview with Rwot Oywak, Pajule camp, 14th May 2009.

²⁷ Lapul village is located approximately 7 kilometers East of Pajule trading centre.

²⁸ Interview with Simon, Pajule Camp 14th May 2009.

²⁹ Interview with Rwot Oywak, Pajule camp, March 2009

not to have yielded enough support from government and hence prompted them to withdraw back into the bush. With such cases reflected upon, it is necessary for returnees to be supported as and when they return back home.



Returnees and peers during a support session

Disarmament

In many instances the trust that exists between formerly abducted persons continues after they have returned home. Taking Simon as an example, he has managed to cooperate with returnees at the reception centre to recover at least three guns. It is the practice that when a person returns from the bush, he is first interrogated by the Uganda People's Defense Force (UPDF) to recover any arms that they might have come back with. The success of such an approach has been limited as guns have continued to be held by some returnees fearful for their safety³¹. Further trust needs to be created to enable success in the disarmament process and this example demonstrates the role that other returnees can play.

³¹ See *With or without Peace: disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration in northern Uganda* (2008), Justice and Reconciliation Project and Quaker Peace and Social Witness

Simon recounted the story of a man who returned from captivity, was handed over to the military but failed to hand over his gun. Okongo Donansio, one of the men who handed over his gun through Simon's help, had a close relationship with Simon before they were abducted. They lived in the same neighborhood and sang in the same choir. As is often the practice, they were separated into different LRA groups and Okongo did not return until December 2004 while Simon had returned over three years earlier.

When Okongo returned, he was received through the Pajule reception center where Simon was working as a gate man while also providing counseling support to returnees. After living with him for a while and in continued interaction, Okongo opened up to Simon and told him where he had hidden his gun after his escape.

I kept very close to Okongo and explained to him how I had escaped with a grenade from the bush. I also told him that I managed to handover the grenade to the military even when I was fearful of doing so. I also explained to him how there were other returnees who had escaped with guns but had given them out without any trouble. I made him realize that it was safe at home and not necessary to keep with you a gun at home.³²

Okongo could still remember the exact place he had hidden the gun so Simon informed security men who went with them and recovered it. Simon believes that it was his own willingness to discuss all that he had been through that inspired Okongo to open up about where he had hidden the gun.

With further training and by involving them in decision-making on issues affecting them, formerly abducted persons could work with and inspire confidence in the new arrivals and would likely create ways to further improve the process of return and reintegration. It would also offer all formerly abducted young

³² Interview with Simon, Pajule camp, 15th May 2009

people opportunities to continue to build networks of solidarity and support and expand the reach of organizations to conduct follow-up.³³

Conclusions and Recommendations

Simon could be one of many formerly abducted persons working to help other formerly abducted persons in Northern Uganda. Whether self motivated or externally influenced, formerly abducted persons can play a pivotal role in the attainment of community level peace and reconciliation.

Simon's experience demonstrates the complications and challenges associated with reintegration facing formerly abducted persons upon their return home. The family and immediate relatives that are expected to be helpful in reintegration of formerly abducted persons can turn out, in reality, to be more damaging than constructive.

The case of Simon demonstrates various arenas that formerly abducted persons can be useful community peace builders. This case should however not limit us to the many more ways through which formerly abducted persons can be engaged in reintegration.

The extended period of conflict suffered by northern Ugandans requires intervention that takes into consideration and supports locally appropriate approaches to healing and reconciliation. A number of stakeholders working in the north have already recognized this, and have been working to promote a form of reconciliation and peace building that

is involving of local structures and initiatives. However, as Simon's story also reveals, these require additional reflection, consensus building and significant strengthening. To this end, two recommendations are presented here:

To the government of Uganda: Consult formerly abducted persons in planning the process of return of ex-combatants from captivity, drawing on their insights and skills to promote successful reintegration and community level peace building. In addition ensure that their concerns, interests and needs are recognized in planning for DDR processes.

Enabling networking amongst the different structures on the ground to ensure the ability to tap ground rooted potentials.

To humanitarian agencies: Develop a system of managing the post conflict situation that involves all the members of the community. Systems should reframe from a focus on technical expertise and explore community potentials, and in particular, involve formerly abducted persons as proactive partners.

If reintegration and reconciliation is to be sustainable, affected communities must be responsible for it. They must be empowered

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³³ *Against all odds: surviving the war on adolescents - Promoting the Protection and Capacity of Ugandan and Sudanese Adolescents in Northern Uganda.* (2001) Allison Anderson Pillsbury and Jane Lowicki. Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children. This report found the involvement of formerly abducted in support groups helped them feel supported and improved their self-esteem

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