

From early ministry to becoming a globally recognised peace bishop

This book explores aspects of Archbishop John Baptist Odama's life, his earlier influence and experiences of ministry which helped to form his spirituality as a "peace bishop" who values the dignity of a human being.

BY PHILIP MATOGO

Archbishop John Baptist Odama of the Archdiocese of Gulu is widely known for his courageous efforts to bring an end to the Lord's Resistance Army conflict in northern Uganda through the interfaith Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative, for his willingness to share his experience with others, and increasingly for his participation in the global Catholic Nonviolence Initiative.

This book explores not only these aspects of his life, but also earlier influences and experiences of ministry which helped to form his spirituality as a "peace bishop" who values the life and dignity of a human being above everything, and who can confidently say "my tribe is humanity".

That's what the book description says. However they say text without context is pretext, which sounds like a mere clever play on words. But it is more. Context is everything. Accordingly, the meaning, value, or interpretation of any action, object, or statement depends entirely on the surrounding circumstances.

Shorn of context, Archbishop Odama's ministry would seem like a pretext for the church to deepen and widen its influence in the Acholi subregion. Indeed, the Catholic Church is a deeply rooted, highly influential institution in the Acholi sub-region of northern Uganda, often considered a "stronghold" of the faith with approximately 70 percent of the population identifying as Catholic.

In spite of this religious dispensation, as it were, the Acholi subregion was plagued by conflict and death. The LRA insurgency in Northern Uganda, lasting from the late 1980s to the early 2000s, created a massive humanitarian crisis, displacing 1.5 million people and killing an estimated 100,000 civilians.

The conflict involved the abduction of over 20,000 children for use as soldiers and sex slaves, widespread mutilation, and destruction of social structures. In a word, there was devastation.

Ugandans saw their lives, families and futures devastated. Even their past was not free from the death and despoliation that surrounded them. The conflict destroyed the social fabric of the Acholi region, ruined local economies, and severely hindered education and development.

These were the matrixes of Acholi life, to destroy them meant doing violence to an Acholi personality infused by a better past and thus promised a better future, only to experience bitter times.

To correct this pass, the Uganda People's Defence Forces (UPDF) engaged in



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a long-term, multi-decade armed campaign against the LRA in order to stave off calamity, shifting from conventional warfare in Northern Uganda to regional "hot pursuit" operations across South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and the Central African Republic (CAR).

While the UPDF largely forced the LRA out of Uganda by 2006, the armed responses have been characterized by high operational costs, reliance on foreign intelligence, and mixed success in eliminating top leadership.

This book also documents the UPDF's war against the LRA, highlighting efforts such as Operation Iron Fist (2002). This was a massive offensive launched into southern Sudan to destroy LRA bases, which resulted in the LRA scattering and increasing attacks on civilians in both Sudan and Northern Uganda.

Then there was Garamba Offensive (2008–2009): A joint operation (Operation Lightning Thunder) with DRC and South Sudanese forces against LRA bases in Garamba National Park.

Other options such as Regional Task Force (2012–2017) saw the UPDF form the backbone of the African Union-led Regional Task Force (AU-RTF), aimed at tracking LRA, with, at times, support from U.S. special forces.

All the while, the UPDF employed a combined arms doctrine that in-

tegrates various specialized elements to maximize combat effectiveness and thereby effectively throwing everything at the enemy, including the kitchen sink.

In this rather small book, we get to sink our literary fangs into a richly told story interlaid by such subplots, if you will.

Primarily, though, *Stop Fighting Start Talking*, is a biography of Archbishop Emeritus John Baptist Odama, authored by missionary John Ashworth. Launched in December 2024 during the Archbishop's golden jubilee, the book documents his 25-year tenure as the first Metropolitan Archbishop of Gulu and his tireless work as a mediator in Northern Uganda.

The biography chronicles Archbishop Odama's journey from his early ministry to becoming a globally recognized "peace bishop". It specifically highlights:

Conflict Mediation: His courageous efforts to end the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) conflict through the interfaith Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative (ARLPI), a rather ecumenical coalition of Catholic, Anglican, and Muslim leaders in Northern Uganda, who famously met with LRA leader Joseph Kony to pursue a peaceful end to the conflict. These delegations traveled to remote areas, including the Garamba forest in 2006, to persuade Kony to engage in peace talks. **Humanitarian Advocacy:** His commitment to the life and dignity of all humans, often summarized by his personal motto, "my tribe is humanity". This imbued him with a humanistic sense of mission which ensured his peace efforts were and are dialogue-driven, based on a non-directive conflict resolution approach focused on healing, empathy, and restoring human connections rather than just reaching a settlement.

Rooted in acknowledging the emotional, psychological, and "heart language" of parties, it emphasizes active listening, shared humanity, and the mediator's presence in creating a safe, often sacred, space for dialogue.

The biography chronicles Archbishop Odama's life. It is also invaluable to anyone who is interested in conflict resolution. PHOTO/ COURTESY

Nonviolence Initiatives: The Archbishop's participation in the global Catholic Nonviolence Initiative and his role in post-conflict healing and restoration in Northern Uganda. In this regard, he joins the apostles of nonviolent civil action such as Mahatma Gandhi, who is globally recognized as the primary "Apostle of Non-violence," renowned for pioneering satyagraha (truth-force) as a powerful tool for social change.

This philosophy, rooted in spiritual conviction, influenced major 20th-century figures like Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela, Leo Tolstoy and Archbishop Odama, if his own efforts are anything to go by.

Pastoral Leadership: Insights into his spiritual formation and his fearless, prophetic voice against corruption and social injustice. Often described as soft-spoken and a good listener, he famously addresses people as "gentle people" rather than the formal "ladies and gentlemen," reflecting a humble and approachable demeanor. His leadership is grounded in "uncompromising values" such as unconditional forgiveness and a belief that "humanity is his tribe."

This book is invaluable to anyone who is interested in conflict resolution, peace and leadership limned by love and sheer compassion.

