



Mother and Child waiting for the rain to pass, Northern Uganda. Photo by Sofie Budhoo, May 2023.

Motherhood in Conflict: Nurturing and Fearing Dominic Ongwen

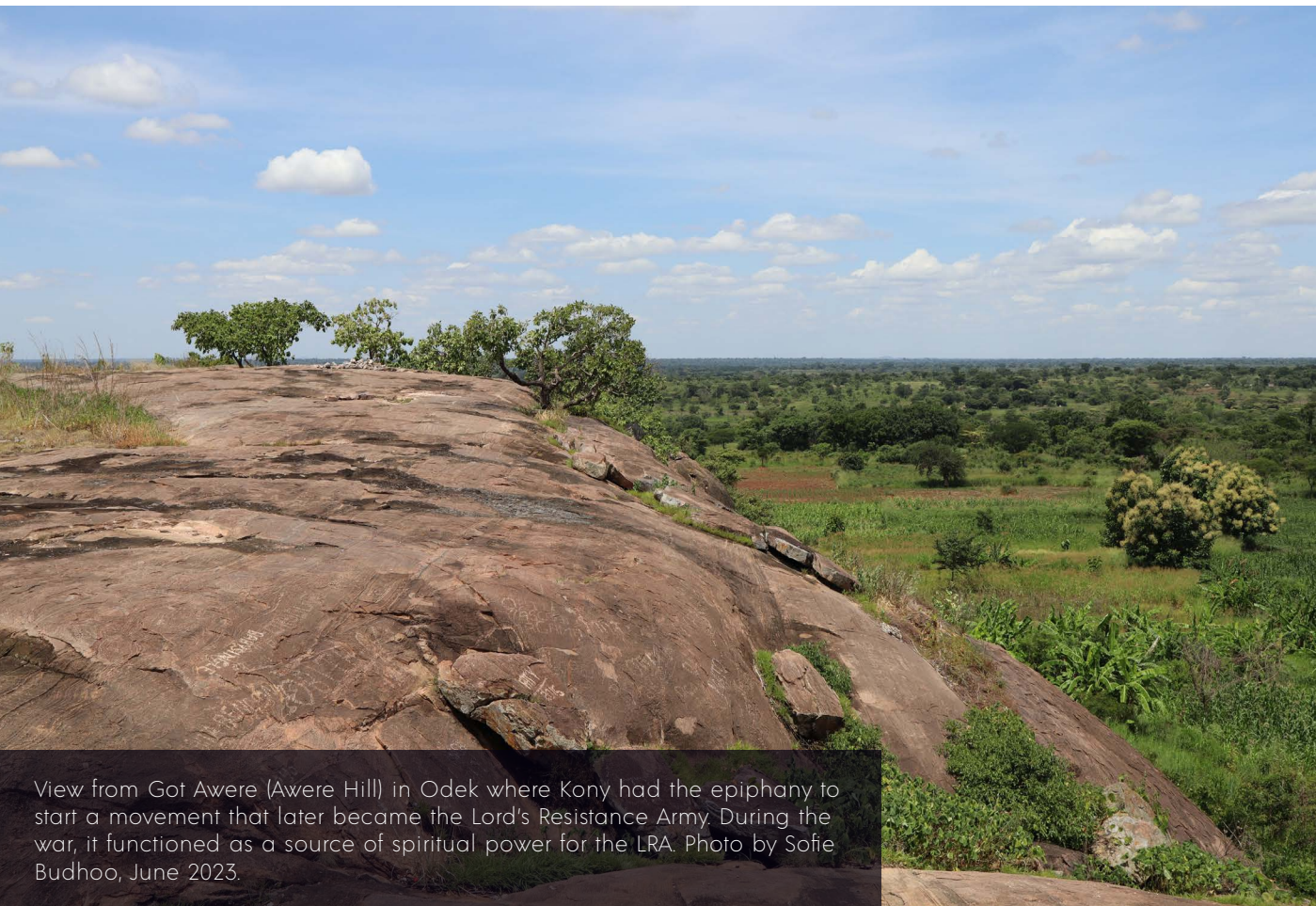
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It was during my ethnographic fieldwork in 2023 in the rural village of Odek, Northern Uganda, that I first met Amogi.¹ Upon hearing that I was researching the impact of the outreach work of the International Criminal Court (ICC) during the trial of Dominic Ongwen, she disclosed that she not only knew Ongwen: she had raised him as her son in the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). This article presents a conversation with Amogi about her complex role as a mother figure to Ongwen and her conflicting emotions of love and fear for the boy who grew up to become a convicted war criminal.

1. Name is pseudonymised.

“I lived with him well. He was very young, so I was treating him like he was [my] real son. I used to love him.” (16/04-2023). Amogi’s words mix with the sound of a crackling fire and the rhythmic drumming of rain on the grass-thatched roof of the small clay hut. Outside, the darkness has started to descend over Odek. Sitting close together on a bamboo mat, Amogi and I try to keep warm in the cooling evening. “How old was he?” I ask. “Ongwen? Between nine to ten years. Around there. He was very young,” she says and shakes her head in the dim light.

Amogi used to be a member of the LRA. She was abducted when she was 15 years old by Joseph Kony and worked as a cook for him and his closest soldiers. One day, Kony handed her a young boy around nine years of age. Amogi was told to raise the young boy whom they abducted from the districts west of Gulu town. His name was Dominic Ongwen. Over time, Dominic grew up in the bush, became a soldier, and later a brigadier in the LRA himself. Today, he is convicted of 61 counts of war crimes and crimes against humanity by the ICC and serving a sentence of 25 years of imprisonment (ICC, 2021). “He calls me Mama Amogi,” she says, as a warm smile forms at the corners of her mouth. “I was the one to raise him up so that he grew well [...] he was just normal. Just a kind person. A kind child,” she adds in a soft voice.



View from Got Awere (Awere Hill) in Odek where Kony had the epiphany to start a movement that later became the Lord's Resistance Army. During the war, it functioned as a source of spiritual power for the LRA. Photo by Sofie Budhoo, June 2023.

While the rains pick up and the darkness grows denser, Amogi tells me about how she raised Ongwen in the bush until he was 15 years of age. He was a good kid; she keeps on telling me. “What happened?” I ask, which makes her soft smile disappear and the crease between her eyebrows deepen. “It was quick for a young child to catch something that you always look at. [...] And when he was growing up, he was seeing what was done in the bush. So that’s why he was trying to have that spirit. Because he was seeing how people were killed, how those soldiers were working. So that’s why he developed that other culture.” Ongwen was taken away from her when he was 15 years old, so that the two of them would not become too attached. It was part of the process to harden him, she tells me.

After they were separated, they would occasionally run into each other at larger LRA meetings around Acholiland. At these meetings, Ongwen would seek her out and they would sit together and share stories. This is when she started noticing drastic changes in his behaviour. “He was having a lot of change. But I normally tried to guide him. I normally would say God’s words to him. But because of the heart and maybe the things he was [seeing] or the things that are done in the bush, he could not allow his mind to set. So, I tried, but... Uhuh, the things were just [getting] worse,” she almost whispers out into the darkness. “Were you ever scared of Ongwen?” I ask her. Without hesitation, she exclaims: “Yes, I was scared! I was very scared. I was scared of him because I was seeing all of those bad things from there. And he would even have killed me – if they ordered him to kill. He would have just killed me”.



ICC outreach meeting, Gulu, Northern Uganda. Photo by Sofie Budhoo, September 2022.

While the ICC put Ongwen on trial, they started to extend their outreach activities in Northern Uganda, enabling the local community in Amogi's village to follow the trial. This would even go as far as showing the trial on television screens at the local trading centre. Amogi never participated in any of these activities. "It was hard, it was painful! If your real child is [arrested] maybe to go into jail, there is a feeling you will feel. Even if he did something wrong", she tells me, attesting to her conflicting feelings of motherly love and simultaneous fear and worry for Ongwen. She is dissatisfied with the court's conviction of Ongwen. He should be forgiven, she tells me, continuously highlighting how he was only a child when he came to her in the bush. From then on, he was gradually conditioned to become the convicted war criminal he is today, she explains. "I think that if he was to have stayed with me, he would have not done all of those bad things," she concludes, turning her face away from me, towards the partially open door where a thunderstorm approaches in the distance.

Bibliography

The International Criminal Court (06 May 2021). 'Sentence'. The Hague: International Criminal Court. Available here: https://www.icc-cpi.int/sites/default/files/CourtRecords/CR2021_04230.PDF



About the author

Sofie Budhoo is a PhD student at the Department of Anthropology, Aarhus University. She investigates the effects of localising international criminal justice in victim communities in Northern Uganda with a focus on the development of social dynamics and perceptions of justice in Odek village.

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