

The tide of war and the mango trees of Uganda

The 2009 Margaret Mead Award speech

Society for Applied Anthropology
70th annual meeting, Merida, Mexico
24-27 March, 2010

Sverker Finnström
Associate Professor

The Hugo Valentin Centre, Uppsala University, Sweden
&
Dept of Social Anthropology, Stockholm University, Sweden

It is the greatest of honors to be presented with the Margaret Mead Award for [*Living with Bad Surroundings*](#), my monograph on northern Uganda. I regard it as a prize acknowledging the stories of my friends living in a part of the world deeply affected by a most brutal war between the Ugandan armed forces and the Lord's Resistance Army rebels. The leaders of the Lord's Resistance Army are wanted by the International Criminal Court, indicted for war crimes and crimes against humanity. But the Ugandan armed forces have also committed horrendous atrocities.

Today I am here in Merida, my first visit ever to Mexico. I really want to thank some of the persons who have been so amazingly encouraging, and who brought me all the way from Sweden, by way of my work in Uganda, to Mexico. I thank the scholars who nominated my book in the first place. I am deeply moved and still somehow puzzled, that somebody actually considered doing this. More, I thank Society for Applied Anthropology President Allan Burns, Executive Director Tom May, Members of the Board of Directors, Members of the Margaret Mead Award Selection Committee from both the Society for Applied Anthropology and the American Anthropological Association. I also thank Will Sibley and his wife Marjorie, Trish Colvin and everyone else who was involved with this process at both the Society for Applied Anthropology and the American Anthropological Association. Many thanks also to everyone at Duke University Press, my publisher, for putting trust in this book project, which I basically had put on ice, after a rejection from a British publisher.

More than anything else, I see the anthropologist as a storyteller, only that the stories of my book are not really mine. I therefore also want to acknowledge some of my Ugandan friends and co-workers.

Anthony Odiya Label, who so boldly shared the stories of his life with me, and who was absolutely essential in my research efforts. Together we travelled many parts of war-torn northern Uganda, on a small second-hand motorbike that we constantly had to sweet-talk and negotiate hard with. But with Tonny as navigator and supervising mechanic, this bike basically took us all over the place. It was hard work. At times, after some eight hours on the bike on very bad and bumpy rural roads, it was literally a pain in the ass.

Tonny and some other Ugandan friends read my texts that I brought to them as I travelled forth and back between Sweden and Uganda. Many soon located their stories in the texts, sometimes nodded in agreement with my interpretations, and even revised or elaborated upon them. In such moments anthropology felt like just the right thing to be doing. Where I had used pseudonyms, some insisted on having their real names and real places given in my writings, which they claimed gave authenticity to the stories in the book. For example, I frequently, as an ever ongoing dimension of my research, bring up ethical dilemmas for discussion, and before we embark on such discussions, Tonny will always remind me of an Acholi proverb, “The growing millet does not fear the sun” (*bel ka otwi pe lworu ceng*). In 2004, Tonny visited my family in Sweden as we continued our research, now far from the immediate war realities in Uganda. Our conversations gave further depth to what eventually became a properly published book.

I also want to thank Otim p’Ojok, who, just as Tonny, has worked hard with me on this project. Together we have literally dragged and carried the motorbike through miles of roads turned into an endless sea of mud because of downpours that somehow took us by complete surprise. Such everyday but very profound experiences bring you together, both in friendship and research. In 2006, just as Tonny before him, Otim visited Sweden. Again we toured Sweden as we visited friends and family, but we also revisited our Ugandan research material. It is good to have been able to share my Ugandan encounters with my family, and Swedish realities with two of my best Ugandan friends. Indeed, my family is now extended over continents and imagined borders, and I value the friendships that have been built up between Uganda and Sweden. When I was back in Sweden, writing and trying to find directionality to my work, Tonny and Otim even took the time to travel around with draft chapters to consult people and cross-check the stories as they eventually turned out on paper. Otim visited Sweden when I was putting the final touches to the book manuscript, and every morning, I gave him a chapter to read. Then I sneaked away, into nervous hiding, pretending to be marking student papers or something like that. In the late afternoons, we would go

through the text, discuss and revise it. And really try to come up with versions that made sense to both of us.

Otim's and Tonny's suggestions and corrections have been invaluable. Over the years, they, together with several other Ugandan friends, have read and scrutinized every page of *Living with Bad Surroundings*. As I said earlier, the stories of this book are Ugandan stories. They are also important ones. I want them to be read. To take the time to read a book, and to allow the stories to nestle in your thoughts, disconnecting you from your hectic life to instead connect you to the more acute realities of war-torn Africa is more important than ever these days. In a sense, in doing the research for my book, and doing so in the midst of ongoing war, I trespassed on the great Ugandan hospitality. As one of the reviewers of the published book noted, my ambition was most basically to portray my Ugandan friends as the tenacious survivors they are, "remarkably resourceful in making use of past traditions as well as new means to manage their lives." Yet I also regard my book as a contribution to a much wider debate on anthropology and the often violent developments in African postcolonies. Here another reviewer was upset, arguing that I downplay the violence of the Lord's Resistance Army, at the verge of being a rebel apologist. To put such a harsh conclusion in perspective, the Ugandan army has dismissed the reports of Human Rights Watch as being "the work of those bent on mobilising for the Lord's Resistance Army."

Needless to say, for me the Margaret Mead Award proves the opposite. I think the latter reviewer read *Living with Bad Surroundings* very selectively, missing an important point: if we are to understand the very real brutal violence of the Lord's Resistance Army, and thus be able to do something about it, we need to look at the wider picture. So behind the stories I tell are many years of work, as well as scholarly loyalty, you could say, to the lived realities of northern Uganda. My ambition with my book was to revisit Ugandan political history, including its colonial and even precolonial past, in addition to scrutinizing the often destructive international interventions of today, to be able to better understand the conflict in Uganda and how globalization is always locally emplaced. I tell a story of a global war, with battles that however are always locally fought.

Stories of today, collected from ordinary people living in the shadows of war, guided me in this re-reading of Ugandan political history. Here I would like to take the opportunity to revisit the introduction to my book. I write there that it can sometimes be quite unreal to conduct anthropological fieldwork in a setting where memories and experiences of war are vividly and continuously reactivated in everyday life. For me, when I first came to northern Uganda in 1997, stories and narratives of lived experiences could appear fictitious against the

background of the nice breeze under the shade of a mango tree, where I sometimes sat, listening to my new-found friends. A helicopter gunship bombing a rebel hideout in a forest some kilometers away added to the strange experience. Of course, it became crucial for me to recognize that my job as an anthropologist is not to absorb the stories of my informants as mine, or to impose uncritically my stories upon them. It is about their familiarity with the world, not mine. Perhaps the contrasting feeling of the friendly breeze under the mango tree assisted me in acknowledging this important feature of the anthropological encounter as I have chosen to practice it.

The mango trees... They are big, lush, and they stand so firm in the storms of war. So many stories are told under their caring shade. I dedicated *Living with Bad Surroundings* to one of my Ugandan friends, the late journalist Caroline Lamwaka. She once sent me an unpublished poem, written in a style inspired by the great Ugandan poet, novelist and anthropologist Okot p'Bitek. Caroline was very glad to hear that I wanted include her poem in my book. I would like to repeat it in part here:

Yes, indeed it is better
To return to the ruins of the old homestead
Than never to return at all
Soon all the people will return,
And the neighbourhood will be filled with laughter and joy
The laughter of children, running and playing
The giggles and laughter of the girls and women
As they joke and cut grass
Huts will be rebuilt, and compounds cleared
And the mango trees will blossom with fruits.

As I note in the book's conclusion, I like to think that as long as the mango trees in Africa grow and blossom – although in northern Uganda the army sometimes cut them down in the effort to deny the rebels food – Caroline's hope lives on. It must. Thus I end my book by quoting the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty. "Underneath the clamor a silence is growing, an expectation," he once wrote. "Why could it not be a hope?"

Why not? In facilitating this hope, I suggested by presenting my book in memoriam of Caroline, we can better understand how people in war-torn settings like Uganda act upon their immediate and wider surroundings, as they try to comprehend not only the violent

practices of the warring parties but also the international involvement. It was my great wish that this would make my book an important read not only about Uganda, nor only about the Lord's Resistance Army, but more, also beyond Uganda, even beyond Africa. It was my hope that the stories of my book would say something about the human condition more generally, that every culture is potentially all cultures.

And here we meet, not in Uganda, not in Sweden, but in Mexico. For me, the Margaret Mead Award is the finest of anthropological acknowledgments. To be given the opportunity to visit beautiful Mexico and to say a few words on Uganda is a perfect illustration of the wider ambition of mine. As the conflict that I write about has dangerously evolved and expanded in time and space, over ever widening stretches of Africa and with a most violent logic of its own, so increases the relevance of my book and also the works of my colleagues, which just as mine are built on in-depth and long-term fieldwork engagements. There are some important texts out there now that take us beyond the many stereotypical journalist accounts. It is my hope that these texts can find a wider readership, and that they inspire people to reflect critically upon what is going on in Africa today, and not least our role in it. Here I see dialogue as the only hope in our contemporary global times of militant and military thinking. If we join the dialogue we can work for good and peaceful surroundings, in Uganda and beyond. "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world," as the legendary quote attributed to Margaret Mead has it. "Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."

Again, a thousand thanks for the Margaret Mead Award.

[Living with Bad Surroundings: War, History, and Everyday Moments in Northern Uganda](#)

Durham (NC): Duke University Press, 2008