

# Encouraging Rebel Demobilization by Radio in Uganda and the D.R. Congo: The Case of “Come Home” Messaging

Scott Ross

**Abstract:** For several years, local radio stations in Uganda have broadcast “come home” messages that encourage the rebel Lord’s Resistance Army to demobilize. Since the rebels began carrying out attacks in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Central African Republic, several international actors have introduced the same messages to these regions. This new effort has internationalized radio programming, benefited local radio stations, provided new forms of messaging, and functioned in collaboration with military actors. This article provides an overview of how “come home” messaging functions in different contexts, examines the effects of these actions, and calls for research into an important shift in military–humanitarian relations.

**Résumé:** Depuis plusieurs années, les stations de radio locales en Ouganda ont diffusé des messages “Rentrez à la maison” qui encouragent les rebelles de l’Armée de Résistance du Seigneur à se démobiliser. Depuis que les rebelles ont commencé à mener des attaques dans la République Démocratique du Congo et la République Centrafricaine, plusieurs acteurs internationaux ont mis en place les mêmes messages dans ces régions. Ce nouvel effort a internationalisé la programmation radiophonique et a été bénéfique pour les stations de radio locales. Il a aussi fourni de nouvelles formes de communication et a fonctionné en collaboration avec les acteurs militaires. Cet article donne une vue d’ensemble sur la façon dont les messages “rentrez à la maison” fonctionnent dans des contextes différents. Il examine aussi les effets de ces actions, et appelle à plus de recherches universitaire sur un changement important dans les relations militaro-humanitaire.

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**Scott Ross** is a graduate student in the Department of Anthropology at The George Washington University. His research on the Lord’s Resistance Army conflict focuses on international justice, humanitarian intervention, and media. E-mail: [scottross@gwmail.gwu.edu](mailto:scottross@gwmail.gwu.edu)

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Once a week in northern Uganda, Lacambel Oryem sits down in his studio at Mega FM and greets his guests. Sometimes they are civil society leaders discussing efforts at reconciliation, sometimes they are the families of children abducted by the rebels, and sometimes they are even the rebels themselves, those who have given up war and returned home with hopes of reintegration. They tell many different stories, but the message to the rebels is always the same: come home.

In northern Uganda, civilians in the Acholi subregion have lived through war for over twenty years. They were the target of both sides in the conflict between the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and the Ugandan government, a war that saw the abduction and conscription of children, forcible displacement of the peasantry, and devastating violence across the region (see Branch 2011; Dolan 2009; Finnström 2008). In response, war-affected communities have developed an innovative use of radio to help end the war. Radio stations in northern Uganda broadcast messages encouraging rebels—many of them abducted conscripts—to escape and surrender. These messages, which hope to demobilize the LRA peacefully, promote the state's amnesty law and encourage reconciliation between rebels and the community. Though the rebels left Uganda in 2006, the messages continue today as humanitarians and peacekeepers record and relay them on the airwaves in LRA-affected regions of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Central African Republic (CAR). As this local response to the conflict has been expanded, however, it has encountered obstacles to its effectiveness.

The LRA conflict has been the subject of many concerted efforts to find peace, and the use of radio may be promising, but these efforts are not without their pitfalls. These radio programs—long operated by local organizations—have increasingly become the project of external actors. Here I examine these radio programs and how they have been implemented, expanded, and transplanted across the conflict zone over the last decade. I will first discuss the general role of radio in conflict in Africa before turning to radio programs in LRA-affected regions, based on interviews conducted in Uganda and the DRC in 2013. I show how the expansion of these programs by outside actors has had unforeseen consequences, and that it has led to a more militarized form of humanitarianism. Overall, I argue that demobilization media efforts must be grounded in local contexts, and that efforts to broaden their scope face obstacles in regard to both reaching their audience (be it rebel or civilian) and retaining credibility. Radio is a channel for humanitarian intervention, but its mobility does not always translate to successful implementation.

## Radio and Conflict in the Great Lakes Region

Throughout Africa, radio plays a central role as one of the leading media for dissemination of information. In sub-Saharan Africa—especially in the Great Lakes region—these programs have played a pivotal role in both conflict and postconflict settings. When radio and conflict are mentioned together, many are likely to recall stories of Rwanda, where it is said that Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines (RTL) incited violence and helped facilitate the genocide of Tutsi and moderate Hutu civilians by Hutu extremists in 1994 (see Kellow & Steeves 1998; Li 2004). The station was backed by Hutu extremists and frequently played messages that deepened ethnic divisions between Hutu and Tutsi and blurred the line between Tutsi civilians and rebels. Though the level of RTL's culpability may be debatable, it seems to have played at least a secondary, local-level role. In his examination of RTL's impact, Straus (2007) says that radio "was not the principle reason why men entered into violence; rather, mobilization was locally organized and face-to-face." Nevertheless, he did find a "tiny fraction" of violent incidents in which radio messages naming particular people or places within Kigali led to targeted killings (2007:626,620). In addition, it is clear that RTL promoted anti-Tutsi sentiments, although it is difficult to determine to what extent this might have laid the groundwork for violence.

Regardless of the actual, direct effects of radio messaging, however, the pervasive belief that this played a crucial role in Rwandan violence has led to numerous efforts to use radio for benevolent purposes. Many have asked, "if radio can be used so effectively to promote hate, can it not then also be used at least as effectively to promote peace?" (Betz 2004:43–44). Indeed, postgenocide Rwanda has seen one of the most comprehensive efforts to promote peace and reconciliation via radio. In 2004 the Dutch NGO La Benevolencija started a radio drama titled *Musekeweya* ("New Dawn" in Kinyarwanda) focused on understanding the roots of violence and promoting reconciliation, active bystander interventions in violent acts, and a better engagement with trauma (Staub et al. 2008). A year-long study found that the program did not necessarily change listeners' personal beliefs, but succeeded in substantially changing their perceptions of social norms (Paluck 2009).

The team behind the Rwandan radio program later developed the story further, incorporating more themes and broadcasting the drama into parts of eastern DRC. The goal was to promote reconciliation with the hope of convincing members of the Forces Démocratiques de Libération du Rwanda (FDLR, originally comprising genocide perpetrators who fled Rwanda in 1994) to return to Rwanda. One report on this initiative highlighted that a number of ex-FDLR had listened to the program in the DRC before returning to Rwanda (Ingelaere et al. 2009). The radio program was not actually a primary driver of demobilization; while many rebels were disillusioned with FDLR objectives and tired of the life of war, many viewed it as propaganda

and did not believe its depiction of a Rwanda focused on reconciliation. The program did, however, play a role in the “dynamic of competing ideologies and mindsets” between the FDLR leadership’s narrative—which claimed that the rebels faced punishment upon return—and the Rwandan government’s narrative of reconciliation (Ingelaere et al. 2009:31).

Much of the literature on radio and conflict centers either on its role in incitement, as in the case of RTLM in Rwanda, or efforts to promote peace through objective reportage or scripted dramas.<sup>1</sup> In the LRA conflict one type of program stands out: “come home” messaging programs. These locally grounded programs take many forms, but for each one the underlying goal of the weekly broadcast is to encourage the rebels to demobilize. Distinct both from radio dramas and reporting, come-home messaging instills feelings of forgiveness in listeners through interviews with affected individuals, and the programs have become a central part of an internationally led effort to end the war. They have been deployed by NGOs, the U.N. peacekeeping force (MONUSCO), and even various militaries operating in LRA-affected regions. But despite the numerous actors involved in these programs and the large number of scholars who have written about the LRA conflict, relatively little has been written that focuses directly on the radio programs themselves.<sup>2</sup> The only research done on radio and the LRA conflict thus far focuses either on peace songs (McClain 2012), censorship and talk radio (Ibrahim 2009), or media practices (Brisset-Foucault 2011). Come-home messaging is a unique type of radio content that has played an integral part in the LRA conflict, and it warrants closer examination.

The conflict itself has fluctuated over the course of its twenty-seven-year history, from full insurgency to what some characterize as banditry or terrorism. The history of the conflict has been marked by phases in which both rebels and the state carried out violence upon the civilian population, followed by periods of relative calm and attempts at reaching peace, which failed due to mistrust or sabotage and led to periods of more intense violence (see Dolan 2009). One recent phase included internationally mediated peace talks and even a ceasefire in 2008, but the talks crumbled and ended when the Ugandan military launched an offensive against rebel camps in the DRC that December, provoking massacres against civilians. It is against this backdrop that radio programs are now working to encourage rebels to surrender.

### **Forgiveness and Reconciliation in Northern Uganda**

The role of forgiveness in the conflict in northern Uganda has been central to local efforts for peace from the beginning. When insurgent groups first emerged after Yoweri Museveni took power in 1986, there were efforts to end those conflicts by offering pardons to the rebels in exchange for their demobilization or reintegration into the military. For much of the war, the efforts to end the war have included the use of radio to disseminate information and communicate with rebels. With a wide audience in the

Acholi community, including among rebels, radio proved to be the optimal way to promote reconciliation. The use of radio as a means of communicating with and about the rebels took many forms and shifted over the course of the war, but it almost always maintained its peace-centered goals.

As the LRA took its place as the sole remaining rebel group in the region, it carried out an increasing number of abductions to sustain its struggle against the government.<sup>3</sup> Virtually all Acholi were affected—either as former abductees or as those who had lost loved ones to the LRA—and as a result many Acholi saw the rebels themselves as victims who should be forgiven. In addition, as years of warfare and the experience of both rebel and state violence took their toll, a communal sense of “war fatigue” drove the broader Acholi community to turn to forgiveness rather than more violence (Finnegan 2010). This culminated in the Amnesty Act of 2000, which was passed with broad support from the Acholi even over the objections of the president. Essentially a blanket amnesty, the act established an Amnesty Commission whose goal was to encourage the LRA fighters to surrender by convincing them that they would be received peacefully. The commission would go on to grant amnesty to more than twenty thousand former rebels by the end of 2008, including more than ten thousand LRA members (Bean 2008). While there was much debate over amnesty and the broader narrative of reconciliation (see Pain 1997; Allen 2007; Finnström 2010; Branch 2011), the narrative of a more restorative way to resolve the conflict became central to efforts to end the war. Over time, reconciliation-centered initiatives dominated the aid discourse in northern Uganda, where the radio messages increased after the amnesty law was passed and as the reconciliation narrative gained traction. The radio programs that are the subject of this essay were just one of the recipients of renewed donor funding in the name of Acholi conceptions of reconciliation promoted by NGOs such as International Alert (see Dennis Pain’s 1997 report) and others. In the years after Pain’s report and the passage of the Amnesty Act, aid programs in northern Uganda focused on promoting the idea of reconciliation, and come-home radio programs became integral to the peace-centered effort to end the war.<sup>4</sup>

### **Mega FM and the *Dwog Cen Paco* Program**

The promotion of amnesty and forgiveness in the LRA conflict has found support in radio stations that air messages about the Amnesty Commission and dedicate programs to encouraging LRA fighters to surrender peacefully. Chief among these stations is Mega FM. Founded in 2001, it was one of the first radio stations in Gulu town and is now the station with the widest reach. When I first visited Mega FM, I met with Okello Willy, the radio production liaison officer for Invisible Children, a U.S.-based NGO that has become deeply involved in radio messaging. Originally focused on raising awareness about the plight of victims of the conflict and providing aid, Invisible Children shifted its focus to ending the conflict beginning in 2011. A former radio presenter, Willy had recently joined Invisible Children to

coordinate radio programming across four countries, a job that includes recording over a dozen unique messages each month in addition to coordinating what various radio presenters air on their respective stations. The day I met with him, he was meeting with a Mega FM radio presenter to record messages to be played across the LRA-affected region.

Willy and the presenter recorded minute-long messages announcing the recent expansion of the U.S. government's Rewards for Justice program. The U.S. program, founded in 1984 and expanded in 2013 with the passage of new legislation, allows the State Department to offer monetary rewards for information leading to the arrest of LRA leaders indicted by the International Criminal Court (ICC).<sup>5</sup> Many proponents of the law hoped that it might provide enough incentive to others in LRA-affected areas such as pastoralists, poachers, and even other LRA deputies to help capture top commanders (Ross 2013). The recordings, made in the Acholi language, announced the award offered by the U.S. government as well as phone numbers for informants to call. They also listed the three remaining ICC-indicted LRA leaders by name: rebel leader Joseph Kony and senior commanders Okot Odhiambo and Dominic Ongwen.<sup>6</sup> The messages played by Mega FM would reach all of northern Uganda, in addition to LRA-affected regions in DRC and CAR where Invisible Children relayed the programming through shortwave radio. They also would be translated into Lingala, Azande, Swahili, and Arabic and played by various radio stations across the region. At the time Invisible Children sent the radio messages to Uganda Broadcasting Corporation, the public broadcasting entity, but it was still in the process of building a new shortwave transmitter in Gulu, northern Uganda, that would eventually service Mega FM. By allowing NGO staff like Willy to use the station's studios and by dedicating air time to Invisible Children's programs, Mega FM has been able to widen its audience and gain access to improved infrastructure.

The relationship between Mega FM and Invisible Children may be new, but this is an old strategy for the station. In her study of media practices in northern Uganda, Florence Brisset-Foucault (2011) explains how Mega FM was adept at negotiating its dependency on international donors. From 1989 to 2001 the only radio station operating in northern Uganda was Radio Freedom, which was affiliated with the national army and therefore distrusted by many Acholi. Many Acholi believed the army was just as responsible as the rebels for violence in the region, including the forced displacement of the population (Dolan 2009), and they accused the government of profiting from the war politically and financially and thus having no motivation to end it (Mwenda 2010). In 1999 religious and political leaders from Gulu were able to secure funding from the British Department for International Development to start a radio station devoted to peace and confidence-building between the LRA and the government. Through this partnership, Mega FM became the successor to Radio Freedom as the primary radio station in the north in 2001. It retained several of the

trained and experienced radio presenters who had worked for Radio Freedom, but enjoyed international funding and the liberty of no longer being associated with the military.

These advantages put Mega at the forefront of the growing local radio market. Whereas Radio Freedom could broadcast only in the municipal area, Radio Mega’s 150km range could reach IDP camps as well as rebel bases. In addition, while not directly affiliated with the national army, the Uganda People’s Defence Force (UPDF), the staff that had stayed on from Radio Freedom had connections with the military that gave Mega FM access when it came to featuring rebel returnees’ voices on air to encourage demobilization. These advantages in turn made it the prime station for NGOs who wanted to disseminate announcements about development programs, further enriching the station. Brisset-Foucault explains that “the sine qua non to obtaining a larger transmitter and to developing the radio station was the adoption of the peace media project” (2011:216). Today, Mega FM’s relationship with Invisible Children is merely a continuation of this strategy.

Mega FM’s employees are crucial to the station’s ability to report on the war and communicate with the rebels. Several have connections with the army, the rebels, or both, which lend these messages extra weight. In December 2002 the LRA leader Joseph Kony called Mega FM’s *Ter Yat* talk show and argued that the biggest obstacle to peace talks was the government, not the LRA. A later episode of the program included a discussion via telephone between the LRA second-in-command Vincent Otti and military and government officials (Ibrahim 2009). One radio presenter told me that several rebel commanders had often called radio staff to communicate regarding a number of issues. These calls were only possible if radio personnel had working relationships with both the rebels and government officials, though even then many walked a fine line of censorship.

One of the most important figures in the history of come-home radio messaging is Johnny “Lacambel” Oryem, one of the original founders of Radio Freedom and the originator of the program *Dwog Cen Paco* (“Come Back Home” in Acholi) on Mega FM. Lacambel is the face of peace radio in northern Uganda, largely because of his past as a central figure in encouraging rebels to demobilize. In 1987 Lacambel was a member of the local government and worked to stop the fighting in northern Uganda between the newly established government and various rebel groups. At that time he met with the families of rebels, telling them about the chance for a pardon and imploring them to convince the rebels to disarm. According to Lacambel, during that time he broadcast a message from a former rebel commander on Radio Uganda. He and a colleague were able to get state and military officials to support their effort to use radio to encourage disarmament, eventually creating Radio Freedom (Uganda Radio Network 2013). When Mega FM was first started in 2001, Lacambel established *Dwog Cen Paco*, the weekly program that he hosts today.

*Dwog Cen Paco* is widely believed to have encouraged thousands of LRA fighters to lay down their arms and come home. Mega FM was established



soon after the Amnesty Commission was created, and Lacambel's program sought to inform rebels about their eligibility for amnesty and encourage them to demobilize. One report based on interviews with twenty-six LRA commanders who had returned home found that two-thirds of them had found out about the amnesty through radio programming, and a subsequent study found that programming on Mega FM and Radio Uganda was the most important factor encouraging commanders to surrender (Conciliation Resources and Quaker Peace & Social Witness 2006; Conciliation Resources 2010).

In addition to promoting state policies, *Dwog Cen Paco* from the beginning has featured a diverse range of guests who speak directly to specific rebels. These guests are often the families of those abducted, and Lacambel interviews them to provide rebels with updates about their relatives and life in their natal villages since they were abducted. For example, one segment posted online in 2013 (and likely recorded around the same time) features two brothers speaking directly to their nephew, who remains with the LRA. One of them, Kilama Christopher, begins,

I am here to talk to my nephew named Odong Patrick. He was abducted together with his uncle called Tabu Charles. Charles has already come back home. I have come here to tell him that he should find a way of escaping and come back home. We are all there at home, your mother Natalina Arach is still alive, your grandmother Buladina Angom is also still alive, they all think about you and they don't have sleep because of you. They want you to find a way of escaping and come back just like your uncle Charles did. (The Voice Project n.d.)<sup>7</sup>

Kilama concludes his message,

I only have one thing to ask you to do for me: come back home. We are waiting for you. I remember when we transferred herds of cattle with you from Parabongo to Ajulu, you were still very young by then and I carried you on my shoulders on the long journey. I still value you so much. I see the pain my sisters and your mother Natalina are going through while they think about you. We all have one prayer; come back home my child. (The Voice Project n.d.)

Later in the segment, Lacambel interviews the brothers about life in post-conflict Uganda.

Lacambel: I want to ask if there are some people who have returned in the community from the bush. How are they living their lives?

Kilama: Your brothers who returned from the bush are having a very happy life. Tabu, who was also abducted with you, was trained by World Vision and [is] now a welder. He is having a very good life in town here. There is nothing to be afraid of, no one will take you anywhere for torture, put you in prison, or kill you. That is all wrong information being spread out there, you just come back home. (The Voice Project n.d.)



Messages like this seek to encourage rebel demobilization by speaking directly to the rebels, making them miss life at home. Even Kilama's answer to Lacambel's question was directed not at the host, but to his nephew. As Willy explained it to me, *Dwog Cen Paco* is part of a concerted effort to make LRA abductees want to return by showing them what awaits them and describing what postconflict northern Uganda looks like:

We want to somehow make them homesick by creating a picture of home. . . . We talk about culture, we talk about business, we talk about politics, we talk about anything just to give them updates on home life. They should know how home is, and then they should feel homesick, so that they can defect and come home after listening to this, "Oh! This is happening in my village!" because I go and do recordings in the villages. Say, okay in this village now a road has been constructed, a center has been built, it is now very beautiful, people are doing business like this, and when you left when the place was actually a very useless place, but now you hear it's developed, people are still there and you hear the voice of people you left, that makes you think you should come back. (Interview, Gulu, Uganda, June 8, 2013)

For those seeking to use radio to weaken the LRA, these efforts at convincing the LRA to come home are seen as the best tactic to combat the narrative put forth by LRA commanders, who often tell abductees that they will not be received by their communities if they try to return, but will instead be rejected by survivors and killed by the army. After being abducted and forced to commit egregious acts of violence against their own communities, rebels are cut off from their kin, and many commanders try to keep that connection severed. These direct messages informing rebels that their families miss them and painting a desirable picture of home work to reestablish that connection.

A particularly important part of the programs' information campaign is the inclusion of former rebels. By allowing them to speak on the air in support of reconciliation and reintegration, these programs lend credence to the words of bishops, elected officials, and others who are frequently heard on the radio. Take, for example, former LRA lieutenant Michael Oryem's message to LRA commanders who remain in the bush:

Remember that I was also with you and you all know my life history. Whenever I say something, it is always true. I appeal to you, Binany, take your time, turn around and come back with all the people with you in Congo. . . . I know that your soldiers are still there so you just come back home so that you begin a new life, you will go and find your children, I heard that your children are grown up. Some are already in the secondary school. You come back home so that you continue supporting their education and take care of them. (The Voice Project 2012)

These types of messages make up a large portion of come-home messaging both from Mega FM and other radio stations. Former rebels speak to those

who remain in rebel ranks in order to act as trustworthy interlocutors for the NGOs, civil society leaders, and others who are working to end the conflict. These messages seek to counter the narrative put forth by the LRA leadership, although the conflict between the two narratives is one that each rebel has to negotiate constantly. For every come-home message broadcast by a former rebel there is an opposite message propagated by commanders who tell their fighters that the messages were coerced and that their friends were killed after being forced to record them. Radio serves to provide an alternative story, but which story is true is not always clear to the intended audience. Just as Ingelaere et al. found in Rwanda, radio programs are part of rebels' "dynamic of competing ideologies and mindsets" (2009:31), and rebels have to rely on their past experiences with the Ugandan state to inform their understanding of the radio messages.

For LRA rebels, their experience with the state has been one of violence, and commanders view the state as not genuine in its overtures to amnesty. LRA leaders themselves have called Mega to air their grievances and accuse the military of preventing peace, and the radio station has had to walk a fine line between promoting reconciliation and giving space to the LRA narrative. When I asked one program manager at Mega FM how he made sense of telling rebels they would be forgiven while the UPDF was actively pursuing them, he said that the station staff had challenged the government on this issue. "These are issues, and we raised them," he told me. "[We would say to the UPDF] 'you say you want peace but still you are firing,' . . . and then even the public would phone in and say 'why do you [the UPDF] do this?'" (interview, Gulu, Uganda, June 11, 2013).

Not everyone perceives a conflict in broadcasting messages of forgiveness even in the context of ongoing military operations. Lacambel was adamant that UPDF missions against the LRA were first and foremost a "rescue mission," and he saw no contradiction between telling rebels they would be forgiven and receive amnesty and the fact that they were also being tracked by soldiers (interview, Gulu, Uganda, June 15, 2013). A series of paintings hanging in a World Vision rehabilitation center in Gulu is similarly telling. The room's walls are lined with portraits depicting children's journeys from abduction to their reunion with family members with captions that read, in sequence, "Pursuit by Army," "Crossfire Ambush," and "Army Rescues Children." Depictions such as these both elide the fact that the army missions may not be purely benevolent and also ignore the reality that any attack targeting the LRA, even an attack whose mission is to rescue abductees, further endangers victims within LRA ranks. Several staff members from Invisible Children staff went even further and described come-home messaging and military pressure as part of one comprehensive approach. As an example, one mentioned the failure of come-home messaging that had been targeting known LRA groups operating in Garamba National Park in the DRC in 2013. "The issue has been, there's been no military pressure on those groups for a year and a half," he said. "LRA defections don't really occur in situations . . . where the LRA is not very threatened" (interview, Kampala, July 13, 2013).

Indeed, beginning in 2011, Invisible Children became active in efforts to stop the LRA rather than just providing aid relief, and it now works closely with regional militaries and the U.S. government. Emulating militaristic language, the organization named a new office for “Counter-LRA Operations,” whose program manager has explicitly said that “Invisible Children does not claim to be neutral. You know, we are not in this conflict saying we are not going to take sides” (Gonzales 2013). Both NGOs and the radio stations thus operate in a blurred area between insurgents and the state, and navigating these interstices is crucial to their objectives.

As a successor to a military radio station, Mega FM continued to receive state funds and had to tread carefully in airing rebel voices due to fears of censorship, and some station staff noted that the army at times tried to dictate come-home messaging and had used the messaging to anticipate rebel movements. As a result, rebels perceived the program as threatening in ways that went beyond encouraging them to disarm. *Dwog Cen Paco* was temporarily discontinued in 2006, when the LRA and the government of Uganda came together at the Juba peace talks. One of the rebels’ conditions for meeting was that this and other programs be discontinued. Instead of come-home messaging, Lacambel reported on the peace process to the broader public—rebel and civilian (interview, Gulu, Uganda, June 15, 2013). The program manager I met with also insisted that Radio Mega continued to serve as a source of information for the rebels by communicating about the peace talks.

There were corridors where the LRA were supposed to travel, and when they traveled through such corridors they would not be attacked.<sup>8</sup> Now, there was no means of communicating to them, there was only the radio, so UPDF and other players would give us the route and we directed them. The rest who wanted to stay and follow until the agreement was signed followed those corridors and it was a very safe haven for them. (Interview, Gulu, Uganda, June 11, 2013)

Indeed, even though programs like *Dwog Cen Paco* were perceived as threatening to the LRA, the rebels had many direct interactions with radio station staff. The station manager recounted that several station employees talked with rebel leaders off the air in the early 2000s, and Lacambel described a number of conversations with rebels who had turned to him to verify claims made by the government or to negotiate their demobilization (interviews, Gulu, Uganda, June 11 and 15, 2013). These relationships have continued into the present. Since the conflict resumed in 2008, radio stations have continued to play songs and present dramas that promote peace and reconciliation, but the most important development in come-home messaging has been the revival of *Dwog Cen Paco* on Congolese and Central African airwaves. Lacambel was ill in 2012 and Invisible Children helped him get medical care and then hired him as a consultant. In early February 2013 his *Dwog Cen Paco* program began anew on Mega FM’s airwaves, with the

shortwave connection widening its reach into LRA-affected territory in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Central African Republic. Invisible Children has been crucial in reviving the program and in building up Mega FM's infrastructure. "We pay for that hour of air time," one Invisible Children employee told me. "We essentially pay for it by building a shortwave station [in Gulu] for Mega" (interview, Kampala, July 13, 2013). Lacambel's direct contacts with the rebels have persisted, and he has utilized these in his new capacity with Invisible Children and at the helm of *Dwog Cen Paco*. In early 2013, for example, a group of LRA left a letter in a Congolese town asking for Lacambel to verify that surrendering was safe and to give them instructions. He was then invited by MONUSCO to speak on the radio and leaflets with his words were distributed in the area.<sup>9</sup>

### The Dangers of Radio

The work of Mega FM, therefore, continues to be integral to peace-centered efforts of ending the war and bringing abducted Ugandans home, despite the fact that the war has moved beyond Uganda's borders. In emulation of Mega FM, other radio stations have also initiated come-home-messaging and efforts to communicate with both the LRA rebels and the broader war-affected community. However, in expanding come-home messaging to other areas, radio programmers have encountered obstacles in their relationship with the rebels or with their credibility among civilians.

Lira district, southeast of Gulu, is home to the Langi people, an ethnic group distinct from their Acholi neighbors. As the war with the LRA began to spread in the early 2000s, the Catholic Radio Wa, founded in 2001 and located near the Ngetta mission atop a hill north of Lira town, began broadcasting its *Karibu* ("welcome" in Swahili) program in response to LRA massacres and abductions. The *Karibu* program was identical to *Dwog Cen Paco* in almost every way, according to Alberto Eisman, the director of the station.

The content of the program was simply sending messages of hope and of relatives, and sometimes former child soldiers who had escaped. They were coming to the program and they were sending messages to the people who were still in the bush. . . . [Abductees] did not have the courage to come back [after being indoctrinated]. That is why in this program, it was found that one of the methods to bring back these children was to reestablish this emotional link that had been broken by the rebels. Messages as simple as, "so and so, I am your uncle, our grandmother died, we are always thinking of you, and we just hope one day you will be back." Former child soldiers were reporting that they were back in school, that nobody was taking revenge on them, that life was somehow back to normal. (Interview, Lira, Uganda, June 13, 2013)

*Karibu* was very successful in bringing rebels out of the bush and back to their communities. According to the director, a contact in the UPDF said that between 2002 and 2006 the messages led to the surrender of more

than fifteen hundred rebels. When the *Karibu* program, like *Dwog Cen Paco*, stopped broadcasting come-home messaging in 2006 as a precondition to the peace talks in Juba, Radio Wa shifted its programming toward a more general focus on peace-building.

However, some crucial differences between Radio Mega and Radio Wa had important consequences for Radio Wa. Unlike the Radio Mega presenters, those of Radio Wa were not as closely in touch with the rebels. Unlike their colleagues in Gulu, they did not have rebel commanders' phone numbers, nor did they have contact with their families. They were not even of the same ethnic group. Thus, when rebels moved into Lira district and the *Karibu* program was started, radio presenters began to receive threats from anonymous callers. One early morning in September 2002, rebels attacked the radio station and set the building on fire. It would be six months before Radio Wa would resume its broadcasts from the safety of a provisional office in the Catholic church in Lira town.<sup>10</sup>

This incident draws our attention to the social relations in which Mega FM is embedded, and which Radio Wa lacks. Mega FM was deeply tied to these relations and was able simultaneously to convince rebels to demobilize, to communicate with rebels, and even to grant rebel voices airtime. Radio Wa's attempt to encourage the LRA to surrender lacked this dynamic relationship and led to its being targeted. The international community's intervention treats radio messaging as a panacea for change, but such interventions require that social relations be taken into consideration.

This difference in the experiences of the two radio stations is important to keep in mind in the context of more recent developments. As the LRA has begun to carry out attacks across DRC and CAR, come-home messaging efforts have expanded across Central Africa. In the border area between DRC, CAR, and South Sudan, NGOs such as Invisible Children and The Voice Project, as well as the U.N. peacekeeping force MONUSCO, have partnered with a number of small radio stations to produce come-home messaging. Some of these stations (like Mega FM) were well-established while others are relatively new, and some were even created specifically to respond to the LRA. For many stations, this financial and material support has been the primary reason they are able to continue their work. This support varies from refurbishing equipment to enhancing recording and broadcasting capacity to providing messages for broadcasting.

For example, The Voice Project, a U.S.-based NGO founded to use music to spread peace, partners with thirteen radio stations across the four LRA-affected countries. Much of the content is produced by The Voice Project and disseminated to each station in segments, allowing radio presenters to mix come-home messaging with their standard programming. Invisible Children does similar work, with Okello Willy, the radio liaison, recording several messages to be sent to the stations on a regular basis. This peppering of peace songs or come-home monologues and interviews with music or talk radio programs gives presenters their own autonomy while ensuring that the come-home messaging stays true to the NGOs' mission.

But while the stations that operate within the NGO-centered network have been able to reach out to some of the rebel camps, they lack the relationship that Mega FM developed with the rebel community. Even though the radio messages originate in northern Uganda, feature Ugandans, and are recorded in Acholi, rebels do not always trust them, and radio stations operating in northeastern Congo have had to rely on connections with Ugandan actors, especially Mega FM. Therefore, even though some of the local radio stations are wary of outsourcing their content—for fear of losing credibility either with their general audience or with international backers—Lacambel and other Ugandans have proved central to the success of these prerecorded radio messages (The Voice Project 2013). The monologues that speak directly to rebels therefore remain predominantly in the Acholi language, targeting mid-level commanders who are almost exclusively Acholi Ugandans. Compared to lower-level fighters, these commanders are perceived as being more likely to have access to radios, more able to initiate group surrenders, and more threatened by hierarchical shifts within the LRA that might encourage demobilization.

At the same time, the fact that Acholi is playing on the radio in a region where the average person speaks French, Azande, or Lingala has caused other unexpected problems. In many ways it undermines the intended effects of come-home messaging by not being inclusive of the civilian population that is victimized by the LRA. When the radio programs first began in the Congo, the local population was wary of the foreign language messages that had been implemented soon after the arrival of a foreign rebel group (and the foreign army that followed). According to Jean-Pierre Mboligihe Ndal, the director of the Congolese Christian radio station RTK Radio,

When [MUNUSCO] started broadcasting messages here, come-home messages in Acholi, the local authorities had difficulties with that, and they were reflecting people's opinions about that. It was the general opinion that those messages are in Acholi and we don't understand them . . . [and] the LRA are the Acholi, so with the rumors going around that the MONUSCO people would be somehow supporting LRA, the people were wary and reacted against the . . . messages. In fact, it was rejected many times, there were so many meetings about that, they [MONUSCO] were trying to convince people, but even the local authorities . . . said no. (Interview, Dungu, DRC, July 2, 2013)

This confusion helped to fuel rumors that the radio messages were encrypted broadcasts through which MONUSCO and the rebels were collaborating to carry out violence on the civilian population (Lancaster & Cakaj 2013:28). Thus, whereas Radio Wa encountered danger in its relationship with the rebels, MONUSCO and Congolese radio stations struggled in their relationship with civilians.

Some Congolese radio stations did find ways to ground come-home messaging locally. For example, Mboligihe embarked on a months-long



sensitization campaign to inform civilians about come-home messaging and reduce their mistrust of the Acholi-language programming. He also pushed for messaging within a uniquely Congolese and specifically Christian context. Thus began the *Nya Nyaki Riahe* ("Solid Food" in Pazande) program in 2012, a program that broadcasts in Pazande, Lingala, and French and uses Biblical references to support calls for reconciliation and forgiveness (interview, Dungu, DRC, July 2, 2013).<sup>11</sup> These programs helped establish a foundation on which subsequent come-home messages and sensitization messages would rest.

*Nya Nyaki Riahe* has also worked with MONUSCO to open discussion with local authorities. Once these authorities were convinced of the merits of forgiveness as a method of reducing violence, many were invited on air to broadcast come-home messages in their own languages. These messages seek to encourage Congolese abductees to return, just as they seek to convince local civilians to accept surrendering rebels. In early 2012 Invisible Children began enhancing RTK Radio's capabilities by providing infrastructure to improve its broadcast range and power source (Peters 2012). Radio RTK's solution seems to have helped introduce come-home messaging to Congolese communities and reassert the social embeddedness of come-home radio, overcoming the obstacles of transferring radio programs across national, linguistic, and ethnic borders. These obstacles, and the way they arose and were dealt with, are instructive as NGOs try to replicate the programs in areas currently affected by the LRA. Initially, this transferring of programs occurred with little thought paid to local opinions and perceptions, and existing distrust of MONUSCO was amplified when it supported radio messages that most could not understand. If organizations committed to mitigating LRA violence are serious about promoting forgiveness as a path toward reducing conflict, engaging with local communities and focusing on the social relations of all actors are crucial elements of their programs.

## **Beyond Radio: Innovations in Come-Home Messaging**

The use of radio as a tool for mitigating violence and reducing rebel ranks has not been without critics. The programs have been seen as inefficient, ineffective, and even harmful, and as we have seen, the programs themselves have run into numerous obstacles. At the same time these obstacles, besides leading to the sorts of adaptations we have seen with RTK Radio, have led to a burst of innovation as come-home messaging moves beyond radio stations and into printing presses, airplanes, helicopters, and army barracks.

There is, first, an ongoing debate over how much impact these radio messages have, a question that is especially important because they account for a sizeable part of both radio stations' programming and the budgets of NGOs. A report by Conciliation Resources and Quaker Peace & Social Witness (2006) divides the factors influencing LRA commanders' decision to return into two groups: push factors (negative consequences of staying with the LRA) and pull factors (conditions of outside life that entice commanders



to return). The top push factors for the commanders surveyed included the ravages of fighting and fear of death, lack of food, and other physical stresses, while the top pull factors were identified as information about home, the promise of amnesty, and educational opportunities. Among the pull factors, 58 percent of the respondents noted amnesty as one of the top five factors, and all but one ranked it the most important. Regarding information about home, it is notable that half of the respondents who cited such information as important said that they received this information via radio, and 92 percent of all respondents cited radio as an important source of information in general. The report further divides information about home into two categories:

background information that sets the general context for considering return; and specific, personal information that determines a final decision to return. In the first category, information regarding the ICC, the Amnesty Act, and the fate and lifestyles of former members of the LRA in general are the most important areas of concern to LRA commanders. However, in order to make a final decision to return, commanders often require specific information on their own families and communities, and on the fate and lifestyle of particular ex-members of the LRA who are known to them personally. (Conciliation Resources and Quaker Peace & Social Witness 2006:11)

Come-home messaging, as we have seen, seeks to tap into all of these factors: *Dwog Cen Paco* and other programs provide information about amnesty and postconflict development, news about families and home life, and messages tailored to specific rebels. The goal, as Okello said, is to “make them homesick.”

However, several studies have called into question the success of the radio programming. Allen and Schomerus’s (2006) report on reception centers in northern Uganda evaluates the numerous centers that aimed to receive and rehabilitate former rebels, but includes some findings regarding radio programming and amnesty. The authors found that only a quarter of returnees who went through the centers had actually received an amnesty certificate, and that many deliberately circumvented government channels when surrendering because they believed the LRA narrative about the UPDF killing those who tried to surrender. The report suggests, therefore, that even for rebels who had decided to demobilize, amnesty-related outreach efforts were probably not the significant factor. In fact, the researchers found that most rebel commanders forbade soldiers from listening to the radio. They point out that “using commanders’ return as anecdotal evidence [for success of demobilization programs] means overlooking [the problem] that these are the best-informed rebels. It is the foot soldiers that lack information” (Allen & Schomerus 2006:37).

Another questionable aspect of the focus on radio is that it may succeed as only one piece of a more complex puzzle of decision-making factors for LRA commanders. Before taking the risk of leaving the LRA to surrender

and return, many commanders must first verify the information they have heard through personal contacts. These contacts—often family, friends, or former rebels—are vital in helping them determine whether or not what they hear on the radio is true. This verification can happen via radio messages, but it can also occur through phone messages, face-to-face meetings, or by releasing small groups of women or children abductees to relay messages to the broader community and receive word from those who were released (Invisible Children and The Resolve LRA Crisis Initiative 2013). Since the LRA has moved farther from northern Uganda, several of these tactics are no longer feasible, which both increases the importance of radio and removes the means of verifying radio messages’ authenticity. There have been several recent incidents of rebels briefly abducting civilians to question them about community feelings regarding rebel reintegration, a more direct—and more violent—method of gaining information.

A 2010 Conciliation Resources report shows how some aspects of commanders’ decisions to leave have changed since the collapse of the Juba peace process and the resumption of conflict. Radio messaging remains a top factor, along with war fatigue and fears of being attacked, but internal divisions within the LRA are a new factor promoting return. Recent reports have also found new obstacles to surrender, such as fears of hostile encounters with communities or militaries and the long journey from LRA camp to return sites (Lancaster & Cakaj 2013:19).

In response to these obstacles, Invisible Children has argued in favor of focusing on mid-level commanders while also implementing innovative means of reaching lower-ranked rebels. While Allen and Schomerus (2006) argue rightly that commanders’ returns are not indicative of the mindset of lower-level soldiers, the fact remains that those with enough authority to have a radio and freedom of mobility are also those with enough resources to potentially escape successfully. What’s more, if a commander escapes, he may also bring those under his command with him. Such was the case in December 2013 when a group of nineteen LRA fighters collectively surrendered near Zemio, CAR. Afterward the commander of the group told Invisible Children that the main reason they had chosen to surrender was that come-home messaging had helped them “lose the fear they had of coming out of the bush” (Invisible Children 2013). This narrative, however, implies that information about coming home is a panacea for demobilization, ignoring the risks that rebels—even rebel commanders—may face in trying to come home and the anxieties of returning to life in a community that many have been away from for decades.

Invisible Children has also expanded come-home messaging beyond the traditional radio model embodied by *Dwog Cen Paco* and other programs in direct response to the fact that many lower-ranked rebels cannot access radios. For several years MONUSCO has printed leaflets that are dropped via airplane over areas where the LRA is believed to be active (Lancaster & Cakaj 2013). Beginning in 2012, Invisible Children also began the mass printing of leaflets encouraging rebels to come home and directing them to reception points where they could surrender. These leaflets include images, maps, and

text, and many include messages from former LRA fighters. It is estimated that between January 2012 and July 2013 alone more than one million leaflets were dropped over LRA-affected territory (Lancaster & Cakaj 2013). However, LRA commanders have reportedly forbidden lower-ranking members from picking them up or reading them. Thus, while the leaflets may reach a broader audience and encourage rebels to flee, they may also be creating new opportunities for the LRA leadership to discipline its ranks.

Another development with perhaps mixed benefits and drawbacks is the advent of helicopter messaging. In late 2012 U.S. military advisers working on counter-LRA efforts began implementing the use of loudspeakers mounted on helicopters that fly over LRA locations in southeastern CAR to broadcast come-home messages (Lancaster & Cakaj 2013). This U.S. initiative has been implemented as domestic support for ending the conflict has risen and Uganda's geopolitical importance in the region has increased. Nevertheless, for many observers who value humanitarian interventions and the neutrality of NGOs, the collaboration between NGOs and the U.S. and Ugandan military in come-home messaging is a worrying sign.

When I met with an Invisible Children employee in Uganda in 2013 he told me that the organization had permission from park rangers to drop fliers over Garamba National Park, where less mobile LRA groups had established camps in out-of-the-way places, and that there were ongoing discussions in Kinshasa to allow helicopter missions. However, the come-home messaging alone was appearing less than effective since these groups faced little military pressure to demobilize. According to the Invisible Children employee, "what we want to do is . . . start forcing them to move. When movement comes, that's when opportunity for defection comes, and when they're at a new location and setting up, that's when people take off" (interview, Kampala, July 13, 2013).

In July 2013 Invisible Children was in the midst of devising a September push to disrupt the LRA's isolated life within Garamba and drive up the number of incidents in which LRA could surrender. The plan was to include multiple flier drops and helicopter flights each week, in addition to increased radio messaging. There was also hope that military pressure would be possible, providing an additional "push" to make life within the LRA less comfortable for rebels considering escape. This goal seems to elide the fact that the LRA has a history of responding to military pressure by attacking civilians. In addition, the fact that an NGO was lobbying for military support in its efforts to encourage rebels to surrender was a worrying glimpse at the future of humanitarianism. The campaign did occur, with Congolese and South Sudanese soldiers pushing the LRA fighters out of their camps, but its effects have yet to be seen (Ronan 2013).

## Conclusion

Come-home messaging continues to be part of the broader effort to end the LRA conflict and bring the rebels home. The programs seek to end the war by sapping strength from rebel ranks and facilitating the demobilization

of abductees. With roots in community radio stations and local reconciliation efforts, come-home messaging has been seen to resonate with the Acholi population that has long been victim to LRA violence. In recent years, however, international actors have tried to expand these programs beyond this environment, and this extension into new communities has encountered unforeseen obstacles as radio stations navigate new social relations with rebels and communities.

Upon expanding into new communities, radio programs have had to deal with issues in reaching their rebel audiences and in maintaining credibility. These obstacles have not heralded the end of the programs, but have instead led to innovations that expand the concept of come-home messaging itself. Yet the question remains of how well international actors can effect change by taking over a local initiative. Invisible Children and other organizations have brought come-home messaging to DRC and CAR and gradually found ways to surmount many of the problems they encountered. But the LRA is still active in the region and the demobilization of LRA fighters has been occurring at rates that are slow relative to the manpower and capital leveraged to demobilize them. That is not to argue that efforts to bring the LRA conflict to an end are not important; the rebel force has a history of regrouping and carrying out massacres, and steps should be taken to mitigate the violence. However, the transferring of these radio programs into new communities has come alongside a new form of humanitarian intervention that is willing to partner with and enable military actors and seeks to end the war rather than merely provide relief from it. This is new territory for an NGO, but it is a window into what may be the future of humanitarianism, especially as U.S. AFRICOM expands its presence into more humanitarian duties (see Keenan 2008; Hoffman 2011) and NGOs promote interventionist responses (see Finnström 2012, Schomerus 2015). This more militaristic direction may be a worrying feature on the landscape of humanitarian intervention, and these partnerships are a new site for scholarship regarding humanitarianism and militarization.

While such partnerships may seem effective in bringing abductees home, they also lump together humanitarians and soldiers, NGOs and the state into a single entity. Such a close proximity with a state such as Uganda, which itself has used extreme levels of violence against civilians and may in fact benefit from prolonging the LRA conflict (Mwenda 2010), does not bode well for those whose main goal is the end of the LRA. That these international organizations have been able to marshal such widespread support for stopping the LRA and embark on innovative changes to expand come-home messaging is notable. But these actions may come with a cost as the Ugandan state and, increasingly, the United States government, increase their military presence in central Africa.

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## Notes

1. See Betz (2004) on reportage in the DRC; Paluck (2009) and Ingelaere et al. (2009) on the use of dramas in Rwanda and the DRC; and McClain (2012) on music in the LRA conflict.
2. This robust scholarship includes Doom and Vlassenroot (1999); Finnström (2008); Branch (2011); and Allen and Vlassenroot (2010). However, none of them places radio programming at the center of analysis.
3. The LRA emerged after the Ugandan People's Democratic Army and the Holy Spirit Movement, among other groups, were defeated by or reintegrated into the national army. The LRA's exclusion from early efforts at reintegration helped clarify, for rebel leaders, a division between "good" Acholi who continued the resistance and "bad" Acholi who collaborated with the government and were thus viable targets for increased violence. For more on this time period, see Behrend (1999); Branch (2005, 2011); and Finnström (2008).
4. This focus on what was seen as more culturally appropriate interventions included promoting *mato oput* ceremonies, revitalizing Acholi governance structures, etc. Branch (2011) and Allen (2007) survey these efforts in their critiques of traditional justice.
5. In the spring of 2012 I met with a member of Congress as a part of an advocacy campaign on this issue organized by The Resolve, a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit focused on LRA issues.
6. Odhiambo is believed to have been killed in late 2013. Ongwen was taken into custody in January 2015 and is currently awaiting trial at the International Criminal Court. Kony remains the only ICC-indicted commander of the LRA still at large.
7. The Voice Project has posted numerous come-home messaging clips that the staff has recorded and provided to various radio stations for broadcasting in LRA-affected regions. To access these, see The Voice Project, "Radio Resources," <http://voiceproject.org>.
8. During the negotiations in Juba, South Sudan, the LRA agreed to establish assembly points at Owiny-Ki-Bul and Ri-Kwangba, South Sudan, for the duration of the talks. The level of safety from UPDF attacks at these points was a frequent point of contention, and Owiny-Ki-Bul was eventually abandoned by the rebels. Nonetheless, during the negotiations many rebels moved across the region to reach these areas.



9. See "Leaflets Targeting the LRA (Lord's Resistance Army)," at "DDRRR Leaflets" on the MONUSCO website: <http://monusco.unmissions.org/Default.aspx?tabid=10734&language=en-US>.
10. This account is taken from an interview with the station's director as well as from Radio Wa's website. For more, see "History," Radio Wa 89.8 FM. <http://www.radiowa.org/history1.asp>.
11. *Nya Nyaki Riahe* is the Pazande title of Radio RTK's program. It is also known by its Lingala name, *Bilei Makasi*, and its French name, *Nourriture Solid*.