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Review of We Are the Voice of the Grass: Interfaith Peace Activism in Northern Uganda

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David Hoekema. *We Are the Voice of the Grass: Interfaith Peace Activism in Northern Uganda*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2019, hardcover, 286 pp., ISBN: 9780190923150.

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David Hoekema's *We Are the Voice of the Grass* has a captivating title, capturing both traditional East African wisdom and the actual words of Bishop Matthew Odong, one of the Anglican leaders in Uganda's Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative (ARLPI). The title also reflects the critical importance of the ARLPI during the final years of the Lord's Resistance Army conflict in northern Uganda in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Unfortunately, the title also reflects the book's biggest lacuna: namely the lack of deeper engagement with "the grass" itself. In only speaking with a select number of ARLPI leaders, Hoekema misses an opportunity to provide a more critical and comprehensive analysis of this important religious peace movement.

To his credit, Hoekema has written an accessible introduction to the northern Uganda conflict for an American audience. In this vein, he begins with the Kony 2012 viral video produced by Jason Russell's influential NGO Invisible Children. Here Hoekema insightfully explores how this movement reflected "the well-intentioned but misguided humanitarianism" (7) that marked much of Western engagement with Uganda and Africa going back to the dawn of the colonial era. This opening move sets up an immediate contrast between tech-savvy, simplistic Western activists who ultimately exacerbated the northern Uganda conflict, versus the more rooted, local religious leaders who helped end it.

Building on this promising introduction, Hoekema then offers an overview of Uganda's political and religious history and how it shaped the later northern Uganda conflict. Some of this history is serviceable. I appreciate, for example, Hoekema's contrasting of the monarchical Baganda tradition with the more decentralized authority structures among the Nilotic Luo people of the north. Yet Hoekema's lack of specialist expertise on Uganda also leads to key errors. He claims that Protestant and Catholic communities in Buganda were "aligned respectively with the British and French governments" during the 1890s civil war (34), but this vastly overplays the European dimension of what was largely a local struggle. He underplays the military and political importance of Bunyoro in the nineteenth century and keeps confusing the etymology (the people are the Banyoro; the kingdom is Bunyoro). No self-respecting Baganda would refer to Kabaka Edward Mutesa II as "Kabaka Freddie" (38), and the 1880s *kabaka* (king) who killed the Uganda Martyrs was "Mwanga," not "Mwanda" (107). Likewise, Hoekema claims that Idi Amin's army traded in gold with an "insurgent group led by Patrice Lumumba" in neighboring Congo five years after Lumumba's 1961 assassination (44). He later mentions the 2017 ousting of "Zimbabwe's Joseph Mugabe" (65), garbling the name of one of Africa's most well-known post-colonial leaders. These types of mistakes are compounded by Hoekema's thin sourcing. *We Are the Voice of the Grass* includes minimal footnotes, lacks parenthetical references in key sections, and seems over-reliant on questionable or dated historical sources (such as a single 1992 Library of Congress report, or J.F. Faupel's 1962 devotional book on the Uganda Martyrs). It is unfortunate that Oxford University Press did not put this book through a more thorough historical peer-review process.

Hoekema is on firmer ground when he turns to the main subject of his study, namely the 1980s-2000s conflict in northern Uganda. Drawing on the work of scholars such as Heike Behrend, Sverker Finnström, and Tim Allen, he thoroughly fleshes out the LRA's roots in Alice Lakwena's Holy Spirit Mobile Force, an Acholi rebel movement which emerged in the aftermath of Uganda's 1981-86 civil war. With a keen appreciation for the public resonance of spirituality in Uganda, Hoekema highlights how Lakwena and later Joseph Kony based their political and military legitimacy on claims to religious power, melding traditional spirit possession beliefs with an overlay of biblical rhetoric and puritanical Christian morality. Yet he also recognizes the political factors in the LRA movement, which played on deep Acholi resentment of their marginalization under President Yoweri Museveni's post-1986 government. Here Hoekema appropriately highlights how counter-productive the Ugandan government's scorched earth tactics became in the 1990s, alienating large sections of the Acholi civilian population. He also contextualizes the LRA struggle within the broader geopolitics of Uganda and Sudan, emphasizing how the latter's financial and logistical support enabled the LRA to sustain a twenty-year insurgency.

As indicated by the title, the heart of Hoekema's study is the ARLPI itself. Hoekema notes the critical role that ARLPI played in suggesting and facilitating the passage of the Uganda Amnesty Act of 2000, enabling the peaceful reintegration of thousands of LRA child soldiers and setting the stage for the end of the war. His interviews with founders such as Comboni priest Carlos Rodriguez Soto, Catholic Caritas director John Bosco Komanech, Muslim Sheik Musa Khalil, and the aforementioned Bishop Odong provide rich personal insight into this groundbreaking inter-religious collaboration. In particular, Hoekema and his interlocutors emphasize the neutrality of ARLPI and its willingness to sit down with all parties, whether with President Museveni at State House or with Joseph Kony in the bush. He also details ARLPI's important if less celebrated work in aiding northern Uganda's reconstruction after the war, including poverty reduction, "cultural readjustment between young and old" (194), psychological counseling, land rights, ritual reconciliation, and women's empowerment. Post-war reconstruction entailed a welcome decentralization within the organization, moving beyond issuing statements to actually training local leaders. Hoekema also describes some of ARLPI's emerging local community partners, such as the Northern Uganda Initiative for Affected Youth, which provided "entrepreneurship training, human rights education, good governance education, psycho-social support, and peacebuilding" to over 2,000 young men and women (221). One of the book's most powerful stories comes from a young adult leader in this group, Moses Rubangageyo Okello, a former LRA child soldier and officer who has become a leader in the reintegration of LRA returnees.

One cannot help but walk away from *We Are the Voice of the Grass* impressed with the prophetic courage and patient perseverance of leaders like Komanech, Khalil, Odong, and Catholic Archbishop John Baptist Odama. However, I do think the book would benefit from a more critical perspective on the movement; Hoekema's laudatory lens at times feels more like cheerleading than balanced assessment. A thicker assessment might have arisen through more extensive interviews with regular Acholi within northern Uganda's Anglican, Catholic, and Muslim communities, rather than only speaking with ARLPI leaders themselves. (For readers looking to delve more deeply into the northern Uganda religious context, I would recommend Henni Alava's and Todd Whitmore's recent monographs). But whatever its shortcomings, *We Are the Voice of the Grass* is still a fine book for the general reader to begin exploring the powerful witness of a generation of religious leaders whose contribution to peacebuilding should be more widely known.