

Alice Lakwena & the Holy Spirits: War in Northern Uganda 1986-97. by Heike Behrend. Oxford: James Curry, 1999. 210 pp.

The aim of Heike Behrend's work is to present a history of the Ugandan rebel movement and its organization under its charismatic leader Alice Auma. Translated from German, Behrend explains how Alice, under the possession of a Christian spirit named Lakwena, raises the Holy Spirit Mobile Forces (HSMF). The author does this through field interviews with former members of the HSMF. Through them we are given a clear picture of the HSMF's battle tactics, beliefs, organization and its unique position as an Acholi 'nation.'

The field interviews, which constitutes the backbone of the book, gives readers a fresh perspective that allows us to separate the HSMF from among the plethora of Ugandan rebel movements. The HSMF was the most ideologically oriented of all the rebel organizations seeking to overthrow the Museveni government. The ideological development of the movement is highlighted by the author, as she describes how a combination of Christian and local animist beliefs, and a focus on the preservation of nature and the cleansing of the Acholi nation allowed Alice to recruit members from a wide spectrum of the Acholi.

The rise of the movement is closely tied to the Acholi's self-image. The author presents a view of the Acholi as besieged from all corners, ranging from internal problems to external military pressures. Lakwena, through Alice, offered the troubled Acholi salvation as God's chosen people. Giving allegiance to Lakwena enabled the Acholi to not only redeem themselves, but to also begin their war to "liberate" the world from sin. The movement gained momentum and won several crucial battles, putting it on the way to taking Kampala. It is here though, that the flaws inherent in the HSMF battle tactics such as their reliance on magic and bullet proof potions are exposed as the movement's advance is checked. The HSMF never adopted Western guerilla tactics and instead continued to blame their defeats on their remaining sinfulness, rather than on their military inadequacies.

Destroyed and repulsed, the group imploded as Alice and some of her followers fled across the border to Kenya. The remaining HSMF soldiers either returned to their previous lives or integrated themselves into successor movements, such as the existing Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). According to Behrend, Joseph Kony, the leader of the LRA, attempted to keep the remnants of the HSMF alive. Nonetheless, Kony soon made it clear that religious beliefs were not the primary focus of his movement. Lacking Alice's Lakwena and unique religious fervor, many former HSMF members deserted the LRA, while others merely abandoned their beliefs in order to remain with the LR. The LRA, unlike the HSMF, remains active in Uganda and Sudan.

In conclusion, Behrend has written a well-researched account of the HSMF. Without a doubt, it is exhaustive in its narration of the group's leaders, tactics and religious dogma. The book is a must for those studying Uganda's rebel groups and contemporary Ugandan society. Particularly, those within the policy and intelligence community will find a unique insight into what motivates these types of rebel movements.

Ian Martinez