

The former rebel recently surrendered under the Amnesty Law and is undergoing counselling and rehabilitation at our rehabilitation centre in Kitgum after spending 11 years in the bush have this to say.

Abducted at the age of 20, from Wal in Pader district in 1992, Kopkulu was one of over 40 people who made up Kony's core killing brigade. "Our job was to kill; nothing else," he said. "There was a brigade for fighting, for ambushes, etc, but ours was to kill."

Speaking a mixture of Acholi and Swahili, Kopkulu spoke about his years in captivity through an interpreter, Richard. Kopkulu said he spent the first two months of his captivity with over 40 other people in a dirty swamp.

"It was the beginning of our training," he narrated. "We were told we had just been chosen to join the killing squad. For four days we were not allowed to step out of that water."

They were later allowed to answer nature's calls and go for physical training in the mornings but they would be required to return to the water after. "We did this for two months," he said.

Then they went for a chilling initiation. "We were told to abduct two people each; a man and woman. We tied the men kandoya [arms tied closely behind their backs] and the women's hands in front and separated them.

"Each of us had an axe and a panga. We made the men lie down, and we hit their heads with the axes. Then we scooped out their brains and ate them. You had to eat the whole brain matter even as it spilled; if you didn't you would be shot," Kopkulu said.

That is what they had for lunch that day. On the second day, they cut the women's throats and collected their blood as it oozed out while they held the women down to their last kick.

"We had to drink that blood. Everybody who joined the killing brigade had to go through the same ritual. After that, killing became natural." After their initiation, Kopkulu and his colleagues were released for duty.

"We raided villages and killed people," he said. "I developed an urge to kill. It is something I feel like doing all the time. Even as we are sitting here, mostly I'm thinking about killing."

Kopkulu says he was involved in killings in Acholi, Geregere, Muchwini, Lira and Soroti. His body bears further testimony to a violent life; he has scars everywhere.

It was when they raided his village in Wal sub-county, Pader, that Kopukulu was faced with the prospect of killing his own father. "When I got home, I found my father and he cried when he saw me. He asked me to use the amnesty law to surrender. I told him I was here to kill him and not to talk about my life."



**I have one disease though; an urge to kill. My heart wants to kill all the time or the nightmares won't go away. I wake up at 11 p.m. and all I see are the people I have killed and then I want to kill again --
Thomas Kopkulu, former rebel**

But his father then told him, "My son, I'm already a dead man. You can kill me now if you want but it will be a more painful death if you live me alive and go back to the bush."

Kopkulu ended up not killing his father and returned to the bush where he continued his gruesome job. But, he said, "My father's words haunted me."
He asked his colleagues what 'amnesty' meant.

Some of them told him it 'was about surrendering'. But rebel leader Joseph Kony had told the group that if they surrendered, President Museveni would kill them.

By now, Kopkulu seemed to have reached his turning point. "For some days, I thought about my father. Then I started having nightmares to do with the people I have killed. I would see them all the time as they pleaded for mercy or cried. This really disturbed me," he said.

On December 16, 2003, Kopkulu made up his mind. "I decided I wanted to go back home and see my father," he said. He escaped from rebel ranks in Pakudu-Lagoro sub-county in Kitgum at 4 p.m. and reported to the UPDF barracks. He was briefly interrogated before he was handed over to our centre for counselling.

But even with the amnesty, his troubles are far from over. "I have one disease though," he says. "An urge to kill. My heart wants to kill all the time or the nightmares won't go away. I wake up at 11 p.m. and all I see are the people I have killed and then I want to kill again."

When our counsellors notice his restlessness, they talk to him and some pray with him. On the advice of our centre administrator Kopkulu wrote a letter to his father who lives in an internally displaced people's camp in Kitgum. His father came to see him.

"I told him what I was going through," Kopkulu said. "He told our administrator that we have to perform some traditional rituals to stop the nightmares. He said it would involve a bull, two goats and other things like pots and brooms."

Our administrator asked his father whether he could raise those things. But the old man could not. Kopkulu said: "My father just looked at his torn old clothes, raised his trousers up and looked at me with sadness and then looked at the administrator. It was a shame. My father just said, 'let me cry for my child now in front of you. That is all I can do.'"

Kopkulu is still at our centre. And he still gets the nightmares. But Dr Juliet Nakku, a psychiatrist with Butabika Hospital said Kopkulu might be suffering from one of the various psychological problems that usually affect people in his kind of situation.

"He could be suffering from psychotic hallucination and experiences hallucinations all the time. However, he could also be having an obsessive compulsion disorder in which he feels the kind of things he does, like killing," she said.

Dr Nakku said that if Kopkulu was abducted as he claims, he could be suffering from a posttraumatic disorder because he was exposed to the cruelties that he eventually went through.

However, if he willingly joined the rebels, then he could have been acting a part of his personality trait. "It could have been that as a child, he always wanted to kill and this was just manifesting itself and that he wasn't remorseful," she said.

The doctor however said Kopkulu's situation could be reversed if he got proper mental health treatment. Hundreds of miles away from Butabika in Kitgum, Kopkulu trusts that a solution will only be found in what his father proposed. He hopes that some day his old man will raise the money to perform those rituals and then he will be normal again.

But Dr Nakku said, "The rituals that the father wants to perform may be fulfilling only if he believes in them. This is a psychological feeling. If he believes he can be cleansed, he may experience some relief but he is still better off if he was thoroughly examined."

