



# **Mama Koko and the Hundred Gunmen: An Ordinary Family's Extraordinary Tale of Love, Loss, and Survival in Congo**

*Lisa J Shannon*

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International human rights activist Lisa Shannon spent many afternoons at the kitchen table having tea with her friend Francisca Thelin, who often spoke of her childhood in Congo. Thelin would conjure vivid images of lush flower gardens, fish the size of small children, and of children running barefoot through her family's coffee plantation, gorging on fruit from the robust and plentiful mango trees. She urged Shannon to visit her family in Dungu, to get a taste of *real* Congo, *peaceful* Congo; a place so different than the conflict-ravaged places Shannon knew from her activism work.

But then the nightly phone calls from Congo began: static-filled, hasty reports from Francisca's mother, "Mama Koko," of gunmen—Joseph Kony's Lord's Resistance Army—who had infested Dungu and began launching attacks. Night after night for a year, Mama Koko delivered the devastating news of Francisca's cousins, nieces, nephews, friends, and neighbors, who had been killed, abducted, burned alive on Christmas Day.

In an unlikely journey, Shannon and Thelin decided to travel from Portland, Oregon to Dungu, to witness first-hand the devastation unfolding at Joseph Kony's hands. Masquerading as Francisca's American sister-in-law, Shannon tucked herself into Mama Koko's raw cement living room and listened to the stories of Mama Koko and her husband, Papa Alexander—as well as those from dozens of other friends and neighbors ("Mama Koko's War Tribunal")—who lined up outside the house and waited for hours, eager to offer their testimony.

In *Mama Koko and the Hundred Gunmen*, Shannon weaves together the family's tragic stories of LRA encounters with tales from the family's history: we hear of Mama Koko's early life as a gap-toothed beauty plotting to escape her inevitable fate of wife and motherhood; Papa Alexander's empire of wives he married because they cooked and cleaned and made good coffee; and Francisca's childhood at the family "castle" and coffee plantation. These lively stories transport Shannon from the chaos of the violence around her and bring to life Francisca's kitchen-table stories of the peaceful Congo.

Yet, as the LRA camp out on the edge of town grew, tensions inside the house reach a fever pitch and Shannon and Thelin's friendship was fiercely tested. Shannon was forced to confront her limitations as an activist and reconcile her vision of what it means to affect meaningful change in the lives of others.

*Mama Koko and the Hundred Gunmen* is at once an illuminating piece of storytelling and an exploration of what it means to truly make a difference. It is an exquisite testimony to the beauty of human connection and the strength of the human spirit in times of unimaginable tragedy.

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