

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



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 themselves 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 from the conflict-ravaged lands Shannon knew from her work as an activist. But then the nightly phone calls from Congo began: hasty, static-filled reports from Francisca's mother of gunmen from Joseph Konys Lords Resistance Army, which 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 firsthand the devastation unfolding at Konys 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: 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.

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