

Article

POORNOGRAPHY AND THE ENTRENCHMENT OF WESTERN HEGEMONY: DECONSTRUCTING THE KONY 2012 VIDEO

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Biographical Note

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Abstract

In March 2012, Invisible Children, a California-based humanitarian organization, created uproar when it posted and promoted Kony 2012, an online video depicting the suffering of Acholi children in northern Uganda at the hands of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), a Ugandan rebel group. The stated aim of the video was to make Joseph Kony, the leader of the LRA, known, thereby resulting in his apprehension by the end of 2012. To accomplish this goal, the narrator of the video calls for the deployment of American troops to Uganda to help Ugandan Army and regional forces track the LRA rebels. Within one month of being uploaded to YouTube, more than 112 million people across the globe had viewed Kony 2012, generating interest and criticism alike. This article extends the debates generated by this video, while examining how the resulting Kony 2012 phenomenon works to undermine African agency. Ultimately, Kony 2012 promotes Western hegemony in Africa by propagating false impressions that African problems can only be properly solved through Western intervention, under the guise of humanitarian concern. Such a dynamic continues to promote a neocolonial mentality in post-independence African societies and the fallacy of white superiority over non-

whites. Kony 2012 misrepresents contemporary northern Uganda and the ability of the Acholi people to address their own problems. Instead of highlighting and supporting the efforts of the Acholi people to implement their own conflict mediation mechanism based on the philosophy of love, forgiveness, reconciliation and reintegration among adversaries, Invisible Children's Kony 2012 promotes a Western military solution, advancing a neocolonial mindset reminiscent of the "White Man's Burden."

Keywords

Western hegemony, White superiority, Dehumanization, Stealing other peoples' pain, Abducted children, Child soldiers, Justice

Dedication

This essay is dedicated to all the mothers in northern Uganda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Central African Republic and South Sudan (amongst them, my blood sister, Christine, and Aunt, Katarina) who are still waiting eagerly for the return of their abducted children in LRA captivity. Their strong faith has translated into resilience over the years with profound hopes for the return of their abducted children. Such adversity has nurtured the spirit of forgiveness and reconciliation being manifested in their pleas for peaceful resolution of the conflict so that both the perpetrators and surviving victims of violence will come out of the conflict alive.

Kony 2012 is a 30-minute online video created by Invisible Children, a California-based Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) working in northern Uganda. Directed and narrated by Jason Russell, Co-founder of Invisible Children, the video presents acts of violence by the Ugandan rebel Lord Resistance Army (LRA), perpetrated against Acholi children in northern Uganda in its war against the Uganda People's Defence Forces (UPDF). The video urges Americans to pressure the Obama administration to allocate military forces to apprehend LRA leader Joseph Kony by the end of 2012, and to ultimately bring Kony to justice before the International Criminal Court (ICC) at The Hague. The attention garnered by the video catapulted Joseph Kony and the LRA to the epicentre of an international dialogue being conducted on a variety of social media forums. Culture influencers or "celebrities" such as Rihanna, Chris Brown, Angelina Jolie, Justin Bieber, and Oprah Winfrey, among others, added their voices in support of the video, popularizing it even more. The video also captured the attention of policy makers in the United States. More than one hundred million people had watched the video within a month's time.

In an essay on truth, Gaskell (2003) asserts:

nature does not determine truth, but neither does social power. The process is symmetrical in that through the settlement of a controversy about how to interpret a phenomenon, both nature and society are constructed. Nature and society are the consequence not the cause of the settlement of a controversy. As we decide

truths about how nature works, we also decide what we are interested in as a society and what forms of authority we believe (p 242).

In this paper, I ask: what are the implications of this analysis when applied to Invisible Children's Kony 2012 video? Gaskell maintains that nature is constructed. Nature does not exist outside of our social consensus around what nature is, what we decide matters as a society and whose authority we believe. Truth does not arise out of nature, unmediated. What matters to us, what we care about, is the end result of a social consensus. What we believe is a product of what or whom we agree is authoritative. And yet, if we can identify with Gaskell that none of these phenomena are unmediated by society, what does it mean to say that social power does not determine truth?

Here, I confront Gaskell's assertion with a specific case that has enormous human stakes. I ask: why did Kony's activities and the story told about this on the web become the centre of international attention and debate starting in March of 2012? This might not have much to do with "nature speaking the truth" about Kony and the violence perpetrated by his LRA. However, it certainly does have something to do with what matters to us or what we would like to believe that "we" care about. It does tell us something about who has authority. And, against Gaskell, I would argue that the case of the Kony 2012 video does tell us about the role of social power in constructing truths. These truths may not be true in the sense that they do not correspond to the experiences, needs, hopes and wishes of those most affected by Kony, the LRA and the current situation in Uganda. But they are "truths" that are believed by many and that carry powerful real-world consequences. Ultimately, I argue, these are neo-colonial truths, believed because they are convenient for the powerful; but they ignore and silence African agency and the struggles of the Acholi people to confront the conflict and strive for peace on their own terms. The truths of the Kony 2012 video are not without consequences. Instead, they put at risk the lives of the "Others" they pretend to save.

Uganda, Joseph Kony and the LRA: A Brief History

Uganda's recent history, which is the story of an authoritarian state, civil war and international aid, may or may not be familiar – although the success of the Kony 2012 video suggests the latter, at least among a general, well-meaning (white) Western public. For those who are unfamiliar, I briefly summarize some background here. Uganda is a landlocked east African country in the Great Lakes region of Africa. During the wave of African decolonization, in 1962, Uganda became independent from the United Kingdom. Less than a decade later, in 1971, Colonel Idi Amin overthrew the Prime Minister. In 1977, Amin declared himself "President for Life," before being pursued into exile in Saudi Arabia in 1979. During his reign of terror, he killed hundreds of thousands of Ugandans opposed to his rule. In 1980, President Milton Obote was elected –following earlier periods as Prime Minister and President -- but was then deposed in 1985 by a military coup under General Tito Okello Lutwa. In 1986, Yoweri Museveni's National

Resistance Army (NRA) took power, declaring Museveni President. He was subsequently elected when multi-party elections were held in 1996 and most recently re-elected in 2011, after abolishing limited terms for Presidents in the interim.

At various points under Museveni's presidency, Uganda was declared a success story by mainstream economists and development experts for its embrace of liberal macroeconomic reforms and some reduction in poverty (but for a brief and trenchant critique, see Byekwaso 2010). Indeed, during the long-running civil war and up to the present, Uganda has been under International Monetary Fund structural adjustment programmes, programmes declared successful by many. Yet by the 1990s, most reforms had faltered, while state corruption and clientalism increased, combined with a chronic problem of recruiting qualified civil servants, as few public workers earn a living wage (see Robinson 2007). There is little evidence that any economic growth during this period has, in fact, been pro-poor (Byekwaso 2010, p.518). Moreover, in comparison with Tanzania, another "aid-dependent" sub-Saharan country, Uganda has performed significantly worse on several basic measures of population welfare, including basic measures of health like infant mortality (eg., Croke 2012). Long-running civil war has been accompanied by the usual horrors, not least the widespread use of rape as a weapon for intimidating and dispossessing Ugandan women (Turshen 2000). This is the violent history against which the rise of the LRA must be understood. It is a history complicated by uneven internal development, with relatively impoverished eastern and northern Uganda, contrasting with the western and southern regions, and long-term conflicts among diverse peoples within the borders created by colonial empires. As we will see here, it is also a history that is the product of yesterday's colonial and today's neo-colonial interventions.

The LRA was formed in 1987 under charismatic leader Joseph Kony, who has claimed to be a spirit medium (see, for instance, Dunn 2004). Throughout nearly two decades of armed conflict against the Ugandan state, however, the LRA's aims under Kony have been unclear. At various points it has claimed to be seeking to establish a theocratic state, based on the Ten Commandments and local Acholi beliefs. Whatever its actual aims, the LRA has fought against the NRA, later the Uganda People's Defence Force (UPDF), from 1987 – 2006 in northern Uganda and parts of Southern Sudan. During that time, the LRA has been known by a variety of names, including The Lord's Army (LA, 1987-1988), The Uganda People's Democratic Christian Army (UPDCA, 1988-1992) and from 1992 to date, the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). The LRA's war strategy includes the abduction of children between the age of 7 to 16 years, and sometimes even younger. As many as 80% of the LRA are abducted child soldiers (Dunn 2004, p.140). This vulnerable age-group is often afraid to escape the LRA, for many reasons, including a desire to demonstrate respect to one's elders and because of various psychological indoctrinations and intimidations they are subjected to (Akena, 2010), including sexual slavery and being forced to murder. Statistics reveal differing numbers of children abducted by the LRA, but UNICEF estimates the figure to fall somewhere between a staggering 30 and 60 thousand children abducted since 1987.

The civil war has resulted in the creation of Internally Displaced Peoples' (IDPs) camps in

northern Uganda, into which close to 2 million people were forced to relocate, as a government measure to “protect” them against LRA atrocities. However, the camps themselves became death traps because of the austere and inadequate living conditions. Lacking the most basic social services, the NGO Civil Society Organization for Peace in Northern Uganda (CSOPNU) reports that each month in the IDP camps, more than 3,500 people died from easily preventable diseases, extreme violence and torture. Meanwhile hundreds of children were being abducted, abused and killed in battle. Clearly the war created a situation that produced a humanitarian disaster of alarming magnitudes in northern Uganda.

The war between the UPDF and LRA caused significant “collateral damage”, meaning loss of human life, massive dispossession and displacement, as well as the destruction of homes, farmland and other infrastructure. The Juba Peace talks, based in Juba, South Sudan and mediated by the South Sudanese government from 2006-2008, did not yield the desired outcomes. Both sides disregarded the provisions of the Geneva Conventions that seek to protect non-combatants, maintain proportionality in the application of lethal force, observe customary rules of engagement and provide proper treatment to prisoners of war (POWs). One outcome was that LRA fighters were allowed to leave northern Uganda for South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) in 2006. However, the peace talks ended in 2008 without achieving peace because the Ugandan government preferred a military victory to a peaceful resolution. Instead of seeking peace, the Ugandan government allied with the Congolese and South Sudanese armies to launch a significant military engagement code named “Operation Lightning Thunder” against the LRA in its hideout in Garamba National Park in Northeastern DRC. The operation, heavily backed by the United States government, was launched on December 14, 2008 with the aim of eliminating the LRA fighters in a period of weeks. According to the International Crisis Group for Africa, the operation was a miserable failure, and in retaliation, the LRA exacted its revenge, while at the same time demonstrating its strength and resilience.

“Operation Lightning Thunder” splintered the LRA into small groups and pushed them north into South Sudan and north-west into the Central African Republic (CAR), where the Ugandan Army has been pursuing them ever since. The operation provoked the LRA to make a gruesome demonstration of its continued potency by massacring nearly 900 civilians in four weeks, abducting 160 children and forcing thousands of civilians to flee into urban centres in search of protection from the marauding rebels. This mass relocation exacerbated humanitarian situations in already improvised fishing communities. As has been the case in northern Uganda throughout the LRA’s protracted war against the Ugandan government, the government’s failure to protect its civilian populations from the LRA reinforces the assertion that a military option can never achieve a lasting solution to this conflict. This is the first lesson of Ugandan history: by sounding the war drum as a solution in its Kony 2012 video, the United States based NGO Invisible Children ignorantly and dangerously ignored the complex history of the war and the voices of the local Acholi community. Worse, in declaring war on the LRA, an army made up largely of abducted children, Invisible Children is calling for military action against these children – perpetrators but at the same time kidnapped victims.

“Kony 2012”: Opening Pandora's Box

The “Kony 2012” video was released on March 5, 2012, by the American-based NGO Invisible Children. The 30 minute video, made available on YouTube, the NGO website and later Vimeo (Bal et al 2013), is narrated by Jason Russell, the co-founder and “Chief Creative Officer” of Invisible Children. “A short, slick and effective” (Gomberg-Munoz 2013, p.288) video, the film sought to shed light on the LRA and recruit young Americans into an “army of peace” (p.288) against the LRA. Within two days, it had 21 million views (p.288) and within a week, it had generated more than 112 million views (Bal et al 2013, p.202). In terms of sheer numbers, it is one of the most successful videos of all time (p.202). Celebrities, including Oprah Winfrey and even President Barack Obama praised the video. There were a range of spin-off merchandise by the Invisible Children NGO including Kony 2012 “t-shirts, posters, stickers, pins and even personalized bracelets” (Finnstrom 2012, p.128). Yet just a few weeks later, “Kony 2012” was subject to tremendous criticism. Africanist scholars, the Uganda government and victimized families were the most vocal critics (see, for example, Mengestu 2012). They argued that the video painted a simplistic picture of the conflict, while raising neocolonial spectres of white, young “heroic” Americans rescuing passive African victims (Gomberg-Munoz 2013, p.288). They observed that the message of the video was factually misleading, “overlooking” the fact that Joseph Kony and the LRA had not been active in northern Uganda in six years. They were concerned about the publicity given to LRA violence, fearing that this notoriety might encourage further violence. Moreover, many victims wanted to forget the violence of the past and move forward, yet the video vividly reminded them of their suffering, in effect re-victimizing them in the process.

Careful scrutiny of the video opens a Pandora’s Box to inquisitive global citizens who may desire to critically examine Invisible Children. But it is not simply the story of a supposedly humanitarian NGO. Rather, it is clear that the NGO's agenda fits well with decades of American military interventions in Africa, interventions carried out for a variety of stated purposes. These includes humanitarian aims, the prevention of terrorism, peacekeeping and to depose or restore governments, as with the United States military support to overthrow Libyan dictator Muammar al-Gaddafi in 2011 (see Finnegan 2013, p.140). So the story of “Kony 2012” is also about the American military state, a state with the world's largest defense budget of 740 billion in 2011 (p.140). We cannot understand the impact and significance of the Invisible Children video without recognizing American economic and political interests in Africa. As the selective timing of American interventions in Uganda (and the world) suggest – about which more below – these have more to do with the control of potentially lucrative natural resources and maintaining spheres of influence than the alleviation of human suffering through military interventions.

In his narration of the video, Invisible Children co-founder Jason Russell emphasizes that all of the policy makers with whom he spoke in Washington about the LRA violence and

corresponding suffering of the civilian population in northern Uganda argued that there is no way the United States would get involved in a conflict that is not a threat to American national security and economic interests. Certainly, Russell and Invisible Children had been lobbying vigorously for a number of years for military intervention without significant success. In 2009, however, Invisible Children were featured on Oprah Winfrey's television show, which has 15 million viewers (Finnegan 2013, p.139), again calling for such intervention in Uganda. It is difficult to trace the complex causality behind state decisions. However, in October of 2011, President Obama announced that the United States was sending one hundred Special Forces to Uganda to help regional armies in tracking down the LRA and removing Joseph Kony from the battle field. When the conflict in northern Uganda and the suffering of the civilian population was at its climax between 1990 and early 2000, the United States expressed no interest whatsoever in getting involved. Now, six years after guns have fallen silent and Uganda has announced the discovery of oil in both its northern and western regions, the United States is sending its military to apprehend Joseph Kony, neutralize the LRA's activities and "save" suffering civilians. How can this be explained? Anti-colonial theories offer us some answers.

Humanitarian or Neo-Colonial? "Kony 2012" From an Anti-Colonial Perspective

Anti-colonial theories, as developed by celebrated intellectuals like Fanon (eg., 1959), examine the complex process by which unequal power relations between developed and developing societies are produced, reproduced, sustained and exploited to the detriment of the underdeveloped. Wane (2011) observes that the underlying assumption of this framework is that group location in the social hierarchy produces knowledge that is specific to that group for understanding their world. Anti-colonial theory reminds us of how the indignity of African continental and Diasporic identity is reproduced to create false convictions of African inferiority and white superiority, African passivity and white power. Western media sources serve as one means for promoting such images, which in the past were used to justify colonialism. But colonial imageries infuse all of culture, both popular and elite, from theatre and paintings to comics and school textbooks to advertising and scholarly work – and has done so for centuries. In this sense, media images like the ones perpetrated by Invisible Children in Kony 2012 can be understood as both reflecting and reproducing neo-colonial imaginaries: stories of powerful, humane whites rescuing helpless black victims from African savages in the "heart of darkness" that Africa is supposed to represent (see Razack 2004 on such "Dark Threats and White Knights"). Nor is the relationship between colonizer and colonized a simple one. Memmi (1965) points out that the complex relation between the colonizers and the colonized creates tension because of conflicting expectations in roles ascribed to each party in the colonial world of masters and servants. But even with these complexities, anticolonial resistance does develop against hegemonic colonial tendencies, as Fanon (1959), Kabwegyere (1972) and Memmi (1965) observe. Therefore, as colonization changes shape, resistance also changes.

Anti-colonial theorists such as Dei (2003) focus on the implications of imperial structures on the process of knowledge production and validation, the understanding of indigeneity, and the pursuit of resistance and subjective politics. Dei situates anti-colonial theory within individual or collective ideas that illuminate different individual and collective resistances against colonial and neo-colonial agencies and hegemony in the present century. Through the power and politics of resistance, he insists that the colonized learn to understand their social reality and work to challenge and change their condition (Dei and Kempf 2006).

One aspect of contemporary African resistance to neocolonialism, as manifest in both micro and macro practices and relations, is critical reflection on and actions against so-called “humanitarian” support (see also Yash 1996). The point here is not the motives of so-called humanitarian workers; it may well be that contemporary NGO workers are sincerely inspired by an effort to “do good” and “help others”. Indeed, Finnegan's (2013) work shows that young, white American youth devoted themselves heart and soul to the Kony campaign and raising money for Invisible Children. But these are familiar colonial sentiments, rooted in the idea that the African Other is devoid of agency, dependent for a meaningful life on the aid of the (white) Westerner. As Mengestu (2012) writes about these Invisible Children supporters and more generally about such “humanitarian” aid workers: Kony 2012 is the most successful example of the recent “activist” movement to have taken hold of celebrities and college students across America. This movement believes devoutly in fame and information, and in our unequivocal power to affect change as citizens of a privileged world. Our privilege is both the source of power and the origin of our burden – a burden which, in fact, on closer scrutiny, isn't really a burden at all, but an occasion to celebrate our power.

Such anti-colonial insights offer a critical lens for viewing and understanding, if not the motives of humanitarian organizations such as Invisible Children, the underlying assumptions behind their portrayals of “the African Other” as either savage or helpless and awaiting a white saviour (see also Ayanga 2012). Viewed through the lens of anti-colonial theories, Kony 2012 and similar actions are not, in fact, about Africans, except as a foil for American youth and celebrities doing good. This does not mean that Africans are not affected by such colonial ideologies. But it is a reminder that the active agents in such neo-colonial stories are never Africans, but always the Western humanitarian volunteers.

In prompting huge moral outrage in the Western world, Kony 2012 invests the West with virtue, objectivity, and humanitarianism; while the Africa shown is one of barbarism and passive suffering. To properly get the audiences infuriated, scenes of severed limbs, lips and skulls are depicted, in the film, to send a message of trepidation and possible warning of genocide. The message is that if the United States does not heed to calls of young Americans ‘philanthropists’ like Russell, then it may be too late to salvage the situation. What was the intention of depicting such disturbing images almost a decade after it happened? As the Kony 2012 filmmakers intended, Western citizens were morally outraged that such a thing could be allowed to happen in the first place. In turn, many children, youths, adults, policy makers and celebrities passionately took it up as a noble cause to pressure the Obama administration into action. In an interview, for instance,

Angelina Jolie described Kony as “an extraordinarily horrible human being whose time has come” to be arrested or killed. Conceivably, stars are easily misled because they are accustomed to following trends among their fans. It is not surprising that a number of them threw their weight behind Invisible Children’s sentimental and counterproductive video. Such support also allows such celebrities to posture as “good” human beings; their humanitarianism is as much about their own public image as it is about the causes they purport to defend. Whatever their motives, they contributed to the growing sense of moral outrage that the Kony 2012 video had worked so hard to foster.

This outrage had some literal “paybacks” for the Invisible Children organization. Two days after posting the movie, Jason Russell would declare on a Toronto FM Radio phone interview that they had collected over five million American dollars in response to the video. The “global humane revolution” that the video pretended to promote was economic. In fact, the video participated in a familiar political economy of suffering, in which the pain and oppression of the formerly colonized becomes something that may be exploited for profit by the former colonizers. Russell’s fraudulent reliance on the suffering of the children in northern Uganda amounted to what Razack (2007) calls “stealing the pain of others” to gather material benefits for his disciples of Invisible Children. As Razack argues, through such events, “We have engaged in a peculiar process of consumption, one that is the antithesis to genuine outrage and which amounts to what I call stealing the pain of others.... we have relied on these images and stories to confirm our own humanitarian character” (p. 367).

I have heard Ugandans express their anger and frustration at having their suffering become mere merchandise – for instance, fairly literally, in the posters, t-shirts and “Kony 2012” stickers that were used to gain funds and raise the profile of the Invisible Children organization. Their suffering has likewise been appropriated to give purpose to individuals in the West. As one critic in the Ugandan newspaper, the Daily Monitor, observed, the video seems to be part of a 1990s wave of lonely, liberal, young Western (White) citizens whose creed - now that they live in essentially secular societies - is the new religion of doing anything to make the world a better place (Daily Monitor April 2012). But if the aim is sincere, the consequence is less than noble. To use the words of Anthony Farley, cited in Razack (2007 p. 378), the kind of activism portrayed and encouraged by the Kony 2012 video is “white superiority through images of Black suffering”. Indeed, much as the horrific images of violence meted by the LRA seem to be the focus of the video, Russell personalized it by centering himself as a white philanthropist who came at an appropriate time to save suffering Africans from their own savages. The suffering of African children therefore became a conduit for exhibiting white man’s benevolence and Africa’s brutality.

There are (many) other troubling aspects of the Kony 2012 video. For instance, the film blatantly ignores the fact that Ugandan victims and their community leaders not only fought to expel the LRA, but have long attempted to raise awareness in the global community of the atrocities being committed. In ignoring such resistance, Invisible Children pretends that Africans are passive victims awaiting a Western intervention. Moreover, the fact that Ugandans own efforts are ignored suggests that for a Western audience to pay attention to a crisis ravaging a non-

Western part of the world, the narrative must emanate from a Westerner. It does not matter how distant that Westerner is from the events nor even whether or not they grasp the basic facts of a complex conflict; indeed, the video situated Uganda in Central Africa and created the false impression that the LRA was still active in northern Uganda. Put another way, “suffering” Africans cannot be trusted with narration of their own life stories in the Western world. Such stories can only be taken as truth and gain empathy if they come from white persons who toured African land, saw the sufferings from their own subject location and returned to report the same in the Western world through the media or other forum. In the meantime, religious leaders, politicians, scholars, NGO workers, immigrants and refugees from Uganda travelled globally to tell the world of the violence of Kony at the time when it mattered most. However, their pleas fell on deaf ears. Instead, Jason Russell’s narrative in *Kony 2012* became the “authentic” story of human rights violations by the LRA. The western world portrayed Russell as an “expert” on the LRA and northern Uganda. Anyone yearning for knowledge about context of contemporary Uganda need not to labor much but simply ask Russell or members of his cinema crew.

It follows that solutions through such an approach are inadequate, harmful, and disempowering to the affected community. As Yash (1996) clearly articulated, colonialism is manifested in new forms in former colonies, through institutions such as NGOs that coordinate hegemony and exacerbate African underdevelopment. If the West sees humanitarian “aid” as a solution, anti-colonial theories allow us to see the ways that they are a fundamental part of the problem, reproducing persistent neo-colonial racism and legitimizing unequal relations across the overdeveloped and underdeveloped world.

“Kony 2012”: Whose History?

This is a familiar scenario. In Canada, for instance, a 2007 film called *Shake Hands with the Devil*, dramatizes the psychological trauma of white Canadian Lieutenant General Roméo Dallaire, who returned broken from his role in a “peacekeeping” mission to Rwanda in 1994. Razack (2007) suggests that vulnerability to other people’s pain seem to be a yardstick that mark Canadians as a people. She remarked:

Throughout the film, we learned little of the Rwanda genocide itself, except that it was great evil, and that Africa had mysteriously descended into savagery. We may have learned that, the west was racist not to help and that there was some kind of colonial history to consider (happily not ours), but we did not have to consider our own economic or missionary complicity.... More than all of this, however, is the fact that we left the cinema warmed by our own capacity to care (p. 382).

Similarly, many people who watched the *Kony 2012* documentary were emotionally charged.

They felt (although without thoughtful analysis) that it was the responsibility of the United States administration and of course, other western governments to intervene. Possible socio-economic impacts of direct military intervention mattered less to many viewers, but rather, saving suffering African children from barbaric African men was the key concern.

In light of such analysis, we can ask new questions about the “Kony 2012” video. For instance the claim by Invisible Children that “they are shaping human history” raises new – and sinister – questions, when viewed through the lens of anti-colonial theories. Whose history are they shaping? Who sets the standard for defining history and whose voices and whose lived experiences are validated as authentic history? How is the depiction of the suffering of the “Other” in the virtual living room of the global community “shaping history”? The reality is that the history of “Others” is being radically distorted through movies such as Kony 2012. The consequences of such distortions are at least twofold. First, they may cause feelings of inferiority among Africans, insofar as the clear message is that their experiences can only be meaningfully captured and reported by dominant groups in the Western world through neo-colonial “humanitarian” organizations like Invisible Children. African voices on African experiences do not matter. Second, such outsider representations hijack the physical and spiritual healings of victims whose history are being “shaped”, hence evoking fresh physical and emotional griefs that require time to heal. In the context of the Acholi community that was the epicentre of the LRA/UPDF violence, any traumatizing past incidences must be remembered constructively in ways that nurture social cohesion and promote peaceful coexistence. Due to inadequate research – if any was conducted - Russell made such healing forms of remembering near-impossible. In so doing, he sabotaged the very community he was pretending to liberate. Relatedly, Russell created new pain and added insult to inaccuracy through the unauthorized and inappropriate representation of Uganda’s children. Their suffering was viciously brought into the living rooms of the Western world through the “promotional” video. The privacy of the victims was dishonored. The organization broadcast ugly memories of violence, invading the privacy of victims whose limbs, mouth, noses were severed. In such scenes, even the faces of under aged victims – children -- are portrayed without concealment.

It is instructive to contrast this “poornography” with the way that Jason Russell was treated, when he had a mental breakdown following the enormous publicity – and subsequent heated controversy – over the Kony 2012 video. In March 2012, it was widely reported that Russell has committed vandalism and acts of inappropriate public behaviour. San Diego Police Lt. Andra Browns told *The Times* that, “Russell was taken to a hospital for observation. This was after he was found in Pacific Beach, dressed in underwear. He appeared to be masturbating and to be vandalizing cars. Brown said he may have been under the influence of drugs or alcohol.” Privacy was sought for Russell. Indeed, the CEO of Invisible Children sent a press release asking “that you give his entire family privacy at this time” (*The Washington Post* 2012). Medical attention was procured. Compare this to the exploitation of the images of child soldiers and child victims of the LRA. Against Russell's experiences, it should be observed that it is not uncommon to see traumatized former LRA combatants/victims walking naked and sometimes, acting bizarre on the

streets of northern Uganda towns. But while Russell and his family's pain were treated largely in private, the child combatants/victims of the LRA were exploited for the purposes of boosting the notoriety of the NGO Invisible Children. Whose pain do we respect? Whose healing do we promote? The answers to those questions point to the enduring ways that colonization continues to matter today, with the formerly colonized still less human than those who yesterday were colonizers and who now pose as humanitarians.

Mobilizing for War, Calling for Peace

It is imperative that all concerned parties draw attention to and focus on overcoming the real challenges that post-conflict northern Ugandan society is presently struggling with. I cannot speak about this with dispassion, although I hope I write with the analytical clarity that is inspired by my own desire for a resolution that will enable members of my family, and many others, to survive these post-conflict years. The facts I relate here are not “the facts” created by the social power of Western NGOs like Invisible Children, a social power rooted in ongoing, neocolonial relations that stretch world-wide and that associate white Westerners with authoritative knowledge. Rather, they are the facts as many Uganda and in the Ugandan Diaspora, know them. Joseph Kony has not been the problem for northern Uganda since he fled the country about six years ago but his legacy does live on and will certainly continue to haunt the community for decades to come. The most pertinent challenge that needs urgent attention in northern Uganda, however, is not Joseph Kony nor any one, individual person.

Indeed, many of the current problems in Uganda are not particularly photogenic. Take, for instance, Nodding Disease, which is currently ravaging the community. Most people agree that the disease has its roots in the IDP camps where residents of northern Uganda were subjected to austere living conditions during the years that the LRA was active in the country. The disease is known to have plagued more than 3,000 school children under the age of fifteen, of which 200 have succumbed to the pandemic. As of yet the specific cause of the disease remains unknown, and therefore a treatment has also yet to be identified. The victims are forced to drop out of school because the disease directly affects the brain with seizure-like symptoms. The Ugandan government neglected addressing the problem of Nodding Disease for more than eight years, and only belatedly woke up to take action in 2011 when local media presented the growing problem to a global audience and northern Ugandan legislators threatened to take legal action against the government for negligence. While the medical and scientific communities continue to conduct research on this disease, the pandemic has been attributed to the government's inadequate policy, which consists of forcefully relocating people into the overcrowded and under serviced IDP camps. Victims, other Ugandans and concerned members of the international community should form a united front to address this pandemic by utilizing the current spotlight on northern Uganda to hold the government accountable for the over 200 innocent lives lost to this disease due to its negligence. At an even broader level, of course, this problem is indicative of the ways

that underdevelopment is damaging to health and how pharmaceutical companies are businesses that seek to solve lucrative and trivial first-world medical problems like baldness rather than invest in research around deadly diseases in developing world.

The Kony 2012 video distracts from real problems, like this, by willfully misrepresenting contemporary Uganda. In terms of consequences, however, the single most dangerous aspect of the video is that it calls for military intervention. Invisible Children called for support for war against the LRA – this means nothing less than war against abducted children. Perhaps if they were really concerned about stopping Joseph Kony and curtailing the LRA violence, they would have advocated for peaceful means and not for violence. In calling for violence, as Freire (1970) articulated, Invisible Children takes a stance that is typical of the oppressor:

Violence is initiated by those who oppress, who exploit, who fail to recognize others as persons – not by those who are oppressed, exploited and recognized. It is not the helpless, subject to terror, who initiate terror, but the violent, who with their power create the concrete situation which begets the reject of life (p. 55).

True humanist organizations with the motive of peace acquisition and justice for the victims would consider the following questions before resorting down to military option as the best strategy: what if my son/daughter was abducted and being held in Kony's captivity today, would military strategy still be an option? What if my brother, sister, cousin, nephews were in LRA captivity, would the fire power of regional armies with support from the US government deliver these close relatives alive? What if it was my sister or daughter who was abducted and forced to become a wife to rebel commanders, now living in the bush with unknown numbers of children? Would military might deliver her and the other children alive? Will the bombs and bullets spare them from permanent impairments and death? There is a general assumption that NGOs are the most effective organizations for mobilizing international opinions on African crises. The case of Invisible children clearly demonstrates that this assumption is misleading because Western NGOs are not accountable since they are not from local communities and hence, not representative of any sector of African society. In brief, most western backed NGOs are entrenching neo-colonial mentality. As Yash (1994) argued, they are imposed, foreign institutions. Because they respond to Western exigencies – including the need for Western youth to feel that they are “caring” and “moral” agents who can “change the world” -- they disregard African realities. In so doing, they put lives at risk, not their own but the lives of African men, women and children.

I started this article by talking about truths and who makes truth. The case of Kony 2012 shows that white Westerners are considered authoritative knowers; Africans own accounts of their experiences, their own struggles and their own efforts to reach peaceful solutions are not taken seriously in much of the world. Social power – the power of white neocolonial authority – made the public “truth” about Uganda in the form of the Kony 2012 video. But there is another truth, one we make as Ugandans who are living with and trying to peacefully resolve a terrible conflict. That truth is that the video tells us nothing about what is actually happening in Uganda. In calling

for military intervention, Invisible Children risked legitimizing the presence of the United States military in Uganda, a foreign military presence that could well become permanent – especially as Uganda seeks to become an oil-producing nation. This is nothing other than colonialism by another name. Worse, the NGO risked the lives of children who are still held captive by the LRA, children who would be the target of foreign bullets. Invisible Children pretends to be a humanitarian organization; insofar as they succeed in mobilizing a military intervention in Uganda, they have blood on their hands.

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