

“KONY 2012” and the Magic of International Relations

Written by Sverker Finnström

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SVERKER FINNSTRÖM, MAR 15 2012

Invisible Children’s ability to attract young people connected across the globe with the film “KONY 2012” manifests far greater magical powers than the ruthless Lord’s Resistance Army it portrays. Together with mainstream media, Invisible Children conveniently reduces a very complex conflict to a colonialist “Heart-of-Darkness” stereotype of primitiveness and religious fundamentalism. This group reminds me of Bronislaw Malinowski’s old thesis that “magic is to be expected and generally to be found whenever man comes to an unbridgeable gap, a hiatus in his knowledge or in his powers of practical control, and yet has to continue in his pursuit.” But if we update the Malinowskian legacy, then a more contemporary reading of magic can be postulated as that which we do not yet understand, a measure of our incomprehension of local explanations for any given situation. However we describe “magic,” it involves an active decision not to understand. Such logic indeed has consequences for what we usually call international relations. One journalist, Matthew Green, after leaving the media circus surrounding the Lord’s Resistance Army, has self-critically recounted how an editor at Reuters in London ordered him to restructure his reporting on the to get “the bit about the Ten Commandments up high.” He complied and “dutifully shuffled the paragraphs to emphasize Kony’s apparent insanity,” as he writes in *The Wizard of the Nile*.

With the film “KONY 2012” Invisible Children is now fully a part of the magical terror of global war, produced not primarily by any Africanness, but in the emplacement of global forces on the African scene. The film is only the most recent outcome of a series of Invisible Children films, all part of an intense and innovative media campaign in the U.S. The first film produced by Invisible Children in 2004, “Rough Cut” captivated the hearts, minds, and actions of countless young college people, culminating in President Obama’s October 2011 public announcement that he had ordered to send 100 “military advisers” to follow the U.S. troops already on-the-ground supporting the Ugandan army. The U.S., while fiercely rejecting any jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court over U.S. crimes, hereby secures yet another physical warfront in its global war on terror, on yet another continent.

The most prominent feature of the Invisible Children films is the making and constant remaking of a master narrative; it reduces, depoliticizes and dehistoricizes a murky reality of globalized war into an essentialized black-and-white story pitting the modern Ugandan government and its international partners against the barbarian Lord’s Resistance Army. Moreover, it pathologizes an entire ethnic group, the Acholi of northern Uganda, to reinforce these categorical differences. In Invisible Children’s “Rough Cut,” there is a part of the film called, “The mental state.” Pictures of four mentally ill persons – all well-known characters in Gulu town in northern Uganda where the film was shot – frame the narrative. One of them is even interviewed, and he is evidently drunk. A diagnosis of unbalanced individual personalities is here implicitly transferred to a whole group, to describe or diagnose that collective, but more generally a whole continent, because then the film proceeds to use motion pictures of child-soldiers from West Africa to strengthen the film’s narrative. The magic of this digestible and dichotomizing storyline of course plays nicely in the hands of the Ugandan government. In fact, several of the very same child soldiers shown in the “Rough Cut” film also appear in documentaries on children who fought under now-President of Uganda Yoweri Museveni in the 1980s – when Museveni himself was a rebel leader attempting a military takeover of Kampala, the Ugandan capital. It is the very same footage used in very different contexts. Readers can juxtapose the “Rough Cut” film with, for example, “In a Soldier’s Footsteps” to see this for themselves.

Over the years President Museveni described his enemies and political opponents as hyenas and a bunch of peasants and criminals driven by intoxication, witchcraft, backwardness, mysticism, and obscurantism – an effective

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recycling of the most essentialist colonial stereotypes about primitive savages in darkest Africa. The biggest challenge in Uganda, as informants have told me, has been to openly criticize the government without being branded with another politically strategic label – the so-called rebel collaborator. “If you say that you are pro multiparty,” said a man critical of Museveni’s one-party-like Movement system, “you are straight away called Kony.”

The mainstream portrayal of the Lord’s Resistance Army, and also of conflicts on the African continent in general, is not without implications, as we now know from the “KONY 2012” film. Even General Carter Ham, when still new as the head of AFRICOM, the U.S. Africa Command, has joined the choir. “I have to tell you, six months ago, I didn’t know anything about the Lord’s Resistance Army”, he said in a video interview last year. “You start to learn a little bit about this, and if you ever had any question if there was evil in this world, it’s resident in the person of Joseph Kony and in that organization” (October 7, 2011). Sadly enough, we now see that General Ham seems to share the political analysis with filmmaker Jason Russell’s four-year-old son who appears as a central character in the “KONY 2012” film. And this is the magic of it: the “good guys” are not characterized as such because they are truly good, but rather by decree, and because they are recruited to and allied with the apparently morally-sanctified side. For example, the Lord’s Resistance Army commander who carried out the 2008 “Christmas Day massacre” in Faradje in the Congo in which 143 people were brutally murdered and globally reported on, has since defected, and joined the “good” side – he has silently worked alongside with the Ugandan and American forces to assist in the hunt for Kony. As far as I know the International Criminal Court is not carrying out any investigation on him – his alliance with the “good” side magically sanctifies him in spite of his violent war crimes.

If the business of international relations is to be respected and taken seriously, it must be understood that the global developments that I sketch here are not without consequences. The American military intervention, now promoted by the Invisible Children movement as the only solution, has itself been described by a U.S. army officer on the ground: “These ex-L.R.A. guys don’t have many skills, and it’s going to be hard for them to reintegrate”, he said to *New York Times*. “But one thing they are very good at, is hunting human beings in the woods” (April 10, 2010).

Anyone seems welcome to the assumed good side. But this begs the question: do we want to join forces with a proponent of the “good” side that proclaims “Don’t study history, make history,” as Invisible Children states in one of their videos? I cannot but disagree with this statement and believe jumping on the “KONY 2012”-narrative bandwagon is dangerous – people who want to act towards a better world should study history. It is an irony that the cover to the original “Rough Cut” film had a quote from Margaret Mead that refers to “committed citizens” changing the world. When I received the Margaret Mead Award for my book on the war in northern Uganda, in my award speech I secretly referenced the problematic Invisible Children lobby by referring to the same Mead quote. Here is again the reference:

As the conflict that I write about has dangerously evolved and expanded in time and space, over ever widening stretches of Africa and with a most violent logic of its own, so increases the relevance of my book and also the works of my colleagues, which just as mine build on in-depth and long-term fieldwork engagements. There are some important books out there now that take us beyond the many stereotypical journalist accounts. It is my hope that these books can find a wider readership, and that they inspire people to reflect critically upon what is going on in Africa today, and not least our role in it. Here I see dialogue as the only hope in our contemporary global times of militant and military thinking. If we join the dialogue we can work for good and peaceful surroundings, in Uganda and beyond. “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world,” as the legendary quote attributed to Margaret Mead has it. “Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”

Thoughtfulness is exactly what is lost with the viral Invisible Children lobby. What happens as a consequence of this is that a heavily militarized and deeply troubled part of Africa – which also happens to be very rich in natural resources – will become even more militarized and mired in trouble. To use Joseph Kony as a global poster boy for Africa’s problems will only make things worse for him, but it will affect the larger region as a whole through the magical global forces that permeate the area by using him as a global scapegoat. “As long as Kony is there in the bush,” a friend and longtime informant told me with resignation when I again visited northern Uganda in 2010, “he should be prepared to take *all* the blame.” His sarcastic comment suggests that the obsession with Kony will never realize justice in this war-ravaged region. While one of my students, a Swedish white male, found the film appealing

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in style and form; another, a woman from Mexico, felt that the story of Jason Russell, his son and the white man's burden was nothing but insulting. Perhaps the very existence of such thoughtful dissent offers a glimpse of hope.

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