

LRA leader Joseph Kony and Western hegemony



Joseph Kony

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In Summary

Last Sunday, this writer asked the question “What is Africa’s problem?”, seeking to understand the factors that keep this continent well behind the rest of the world. The crucial factor of a lack of access to the major world markets and distribution chains was briefly touched on. This past week, it came powerfully in the spotlight.

In the wake of the collapse of the Holy Spirit Movement rebel uprising in Acholi in 1986, an offshoot called the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) was formed to fight the brutality that the victorious NRA guerrilla army of Yoweri Museveni had unleashed on the Acholi after 1986.

The LRA was led by a former Catholic altar boy named Joseph Kony. Kony became infamous in Uganda and later in many parts of the world for his reported barbarism against the very civilian population on whose behalf he was supposed to be fighting.

Several reports, however, had a parallel story of how many of the best-publicised Kony massacres and atrocities were actually by the NRA (later UPDF) dressed up in the rag-tag appearance of the LRA, in order to further destroy Kony's reputation.

Many peace initiatives were advanced. Betty Bigombe was named Minister of State in the Office of the Prime Minister in charge of pacification of the North. There was a Northern Uganda Reconstruction Programme, various pressure groups like the Acholi Parliamentary Group, the Gulu Peace Walk, efforts by Bishop John Baptist Ondama, and Kacoke Madit, a gathering in London called by the Acholi.

They all came and went with little to show for it. Then came Jason Russell and the new documentary titled Kony 2012.

The West's publicity genius

Whatever criticism that we level at it and the objections we raise about its naivety, we cannot take away the most important fact about Kony 2012 - it has worked. It is one of the most brilliant and successful marketing and distribution achievements of 2012. It is this, rather than the contentious angle of the film, that has shaken me the most. By 1pm Ugandan time on Friday March 9, 49,639,775 views of this video had been registered on the YouTube video-sharing website.

It is this ability to totally dominate the media, the advertising and distribution channels that has led to the worldwide popularity of the English Premier League and the global instant facial and name recognition of otherwise unremarkable American socialites such as Paris Hilton, Kim Kardashian and even, to a large extent, Oprah Winfrey.

One of the things that make the video so compelling is its opening four minutes. It sounds like one of those scary, end-of-the-world scare stories. It starts off with a suspense-filled narration that gives an overview of how the Internet is changing the world and into the fourth minute, one starts sensing the direction it is about to take.

The film, directed by Russell, is full of the stereotyping of Tropical Africa and the Black world so familiar to Africans. It is narrated through children's eyes and seeks to or manages to tug at the heart.

In many ways, it is a continuation of the 2007 film *The Last King of Scotland*, in which the former Ugandan president Idi Amin is portrayed through the eyes of a White westerner who spent some time in Uganda: Africans having their own history told to them through the lenses of Europeans or Americans.

Kony 2012 is part a "Lost Boys" of Sudan type documentary centred on the suffering of Black Africans living in almost Aboriginal backwardness. It is part a Band Aid (Do They Know Its Christmas) and USA For Africa (We Are the World) famine relief effort, part amateur home video, part Oprah Winfrey on-camera confessional.

It is part a commentary the impact of Facebook and other social media on global society, part a ringing clarion call to America not to retreat into isolation but continue to be a moral force for good in the world.

Growing trends

Finally, it is part the familiar post-1990s, patronising White Western obsession with fashionable, feel good social causes and human rights crusading. A 21st Century Internet Woodstock, featuring the efforts of lonely, liberal, young Western (White) citizens whose creed - now that they live in essentially secular societies - is the news religion of doing anything “to make the world a better place.”

As it is with most Western, English-speaking portrayal of the world’s distressing situations, Kony 2012 starts off from the point of defining everything as good guys and bad guys. As simple as that. Hardly any background and in depth research. Just an appeal to the side of human beings that gets outraged by appalling evil.

Russell the narrator gets into recommendations on what should be done: the United States must send troops to Uganda (Uganda, by the way, is located in East Africa, not Central Africa, as Russell states) to apprehend Kony.

This particular part in the documentary urging America to put its boots on the ground in Uganda struck many Ugandans as suspicious. This is the way the “Arab Spring” started and how the hysterical reporting on the Syrian “activists” started off.

For more than 20 years, Uganda’s best-educated political, academic and media elite had tried their best to report on, analyse and publicise the story of Joseph Kony. Annual meetings, the Kacoke Madit of the Acholi community in the Diaspora made this their top concern.

And yet here we are, a 29-minute, 59-second film shot by three young Americans led by cinematographer Jason Russell debuts on Monday March 5, 2012 and by Thursday night March 8, 2012, the video has spread into every nook of the Internet, trending on Twitter, flooding Facebook and discussed on most of the top entertainment and news television channels in the United States.

This is a lesson that Africa must learn from this video, that is if most Africans are not already painfully aware of these cold facts.

Much more investment should be made in the media, in marketing and in understanding how these shape Western public opinion.

For years, Africans have had to get used to world news bulletins from Western TV and radio stations that highlight the disappearance of a White tourist on a hitch-hiking trip in Namibia or surfing on the beach in Indonesia.

Whatever the Western world sets its mind upon becomes the interest - or is made the interest of the rest of the world.

However, as said before, the main focus of this article is looking on, intrigued, at how central a media narrative and reporting angle is in shaping Western public opinion and this opinion later turns into concrete state policy.

It was this social activism, this organisational ability especially of White Americans, that in 2008 created the phenomenon that became Barack Obama. The Spice Girls in the 1990s,

Frankie Goes to Hollywood, Madonna and Michael Jackson in the 1980s, the Beatles in the 1960s - all these were global sensations created by this concept of an idea “going viral”.

That is partly the way huge global brands like Apple, Coca-Cola, Nike and Fruit-of-the-Loom were created.

The video Kony 2012 is not striking in any particular way, be it in the cinematography or script. Its main strength might be in the moral appeal to an indifferent world.

But as has now happened, its absolute success has come about mainly because there exists a marketing, distribution, publicity and fundraising machinery in the West that drives much of everything.

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