

Africans are not brainwashed but how do we explain Uganda's failure



Youth in Lira town watch Kony 2012 video before screening was disrupted by angry youth. The movie has achieved worldwide acclaim but has failed to impress in Uganda

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In Summary

Brainwashing and mind control by the West has succeeded partly because of the propaganda and media machinery that the West has mastered so well; but it is also because of certain objective realities.

Since the explosion on the Internet of the Kony 2012 documentary film on the veteran Ugandan rebel leader Joseph Kony, and the largely negative reaction in Uganda (such as what we saw in Lira town last week), much discussion has turned to the question of western stereotypes about Africans and whose right it is to narrate or define African history.

Many thought the video racist or at best patronising and inaccurate. Others saw in it a cunning foreign policy move underway by the United States government to whip up western sentiment and by that, justify a sudden increase in American military deployment in Uganda.

Others saw a self-serving effort by the San Diego-based NGO Invisible Children to play on this tragedy and attract millions of dollars in charity contributions.

A few saw the film creator Jason Russell as a well-meaning but ill-informed, idealistic young White man at work, part of the now in vogue western emphasis on “doing your part to change the world”.

Andrew Mwenda, Strategic Editorial Director of the Independent Magazine has broadened the discussion to the argument that this is part of the tragic story of Africa.

African history and the very way Africans and other Black people fundamentally view themselves, Mwenda insists, has been shaped by 500 years of western intellectual, political and popular culture programming that portrayed Blacks as inferior, incompetent, dirty, disorganised and Africa as a place of failure.

This is a complicated topic, mainly because of how rooted it is in the still-sensitive subjects of apartheid, colonialism and the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

My view, in a discussion with Mwenda on Friday, is that western brainwashing and mind control has succeeded partly because of the propaganda and media machinery that the West has mastered so well; but it is also because of certain objective realities.

There are certain things the West, as dominant as it is, has failed to achieve. The current western obsession with gay rights, pumped daily at Africa and portraying Africa as somehow feudal and backward in mentality has not achieved much.

More than 98 per cent of all Africans, from the elite and westernised to the rural peasants, still find homosexuality offensive and firmly oppose it. No amount of trying to make it seem fashionable or post-modern or acceptable because many top western media and entertainment celebrities are gay, has succeeded in causing Africans to warm up to the idea of legalizing or accepting homosexuality.

Secondly, by last week the Kony 2012 video had been seen up to 100 million times on the video website YouTube.com, making it by several accounts the most successful Internet video since the advent of the Internet age.

Unmoved

This amazing success of the film should have caused Ugandans, in their brainwashed state, to welcome it and accept its basic narrative about Kony. Instead, the only country on earth in which the video was a flop, received heavy criticism and as in Lira, even led to a violent, stone-throwing reaction, was Uganda (the country in which the documentary is set).

No matter how much the western media touted the success of Kony 2012, Ugandans remained unmoved. This too shows that there is a limit to how much Africans have been brainwashed or how much they can be manipulated by the western media.

Thirdly, most Africans, be they rural or urban, still find European or American food unsatisfactory. Soda, chocolate, ice cream, cake, wine and certain fast foods like chips and hamburgers have become popular with the urban African.

But to a large degree, most Africans still think of these as delicacies and snacks and for the most part Africans are satisfied with their traditional dishes.

The other thing that western media imagery and popular culture have failed to achieve is to turn Africans into irreligious people. Most Africans by far, be they Muslim or Christians or those in the minority Hindu and Sikh faiths, are overwhelmingly religious.

They will watch western soaps, live and study in western universities, visit their cities, but still return home with their basic religious beliefs still intact.

Even the most lukewarm African Muslims or hypocritical Christians still find it difficult, for example, to imagine upon a relative's death, not holding some kind of religious memorial service or having a cleric perform last rites at the graveside. And as many of us know, no amount of western religious and educational criticism have succeeded in making most Africans abandon their traditional belief in witchcraft.

Even where Africans in the major cities have tuned in to western culture, it has more often been the Black western rather than White western culture.

The most popular TV comedies on Ugandan television have always been the Black America's *Different Strokes*, *The Jeffersons*, *Sanford and Son*, *Good Times*; the most popular music shows were *Soul Train*; the most popular music and bands has overwhelmingly been Soul, R&B, Jazz, Hip-Hop, Soca, and Reggae.

The biggest Rock stars in Africa were Michael Jackson, Kool and The Gang, Whitney Houston, MC Hammer, Soul II Soul, New Edition, SWV, Chic, Jimmy Cliff, Xscape, London Beat, Chris Brown, the Supremes, Sade, George Benson, Lionel Richie, Sister Sledge, Destiny's Child, Luther Vandross, Bob Marley and the Wailers, and so on.

In other words, the examples above demonstrate that the idea many of us hold that colonialism and over the last 50 years, western education, media programming, advertising and aid have brainwashed most Africans is true, but only to some extent.

Africans have responded to the 100 year barrage of western culture and popular imagery with rational choices, taking up what they relate to most and remaining indifferent or even hostile to certain core shades of White popular culture like Punk Rock, the "Gothic" look and heavy metal music.

This means that when we examine the areas in which Africans have adopted the western, White culture, it suggests an objective strength about the West rather than a brainwashing on the part of the African.

In awe

The post-colonial literature such as that by Ngugi wa Thiongo, Mungo Beti, Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka and others seemed to suggest that Africans had, open-mouthed and in somewhat silly aping, had abandoned their culture and in a pathetic way adopted the "White man's ways".

Africans who first encountered the missionaries and colonial administrators were in awe of western administrative order and technological advancement. They saw modern methods of hygiene, education, governmental structure and law enforcement.

Most Ugandans today, seeing how their country has sunk into a shambles under the NRM government (and others before it), believe strongly and with good reason that the colonial period was Uganda's Golden Era.

There is an industriousness, great imagination, sense of adventure and drive about Whites that cannot be ignored and which preceded colonialism by centuries. The commonly held idea that the West is advanced because it looted Africa's wealth simply is not true.

Long before colonialism, Europe had Greece and Rome. The historical cathedrals and universities in France, Italy and England dating back to the 12th century show Europe's advancement preceded its colonial invasion of Africa by 300 to 400 years.

Since the mid 1970s, the rise of such huge international companies as Microsoft, Apple, Facebook, Google, eBay, Amazon, Oracle, Netscape, Yahoo!, Twitter and others --- based mainly on engineering and marketing and not on using African slave labour --- point to that side of the West that can prosper and usually has prospered even without the exploitation of Africa.

Norway, Austria, Finland, Denmark and other prosperous European states that did not possess African colonies have proved that, if anything, some European states that did not colonise Africa are doing better than former colonial masters like Portugal and Spain.

Since it is clear, as this article has argued, that Africans are not as fully brainwashed as most of us suppose, in this 50th independence anniversary year, we must find a more objective explanation for our failings as Uganda than the usual tale of colonialism and neo-colonialism.

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