

Stop bitching about Kony 2012, we live in McWorld



By TEE NGUGI ([email the author](#))

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Kony 2012, the video by the American Jason Russell that sought to focus world attention on Joseph Kony, has attracted unforgiving condemnation from African intellectuals.

The various reactions can be crystallised into three main concerns:

One, the video continued a tradition of Western oversimplification of a complex issue, and reduced lives and suffering into a made-for-mass consumption campaign gimmick.

Two, the narrative voice was that of a white person, not that of a victim of Kony's atrocities.

Three, it presented Africans as victims waiting to be saved and not as agents in their own historical narrative.

The counterargument by Invisible Children, the charity that made the video, is that practical considerations dictated by the nature of a campaign video limited its scope, and it points out that it achieved its purpose, which was to bring into public discussion Joseph Kony and the LRA.

What I found interesting about criticism of the video was that the analytical terms were borrowed from an ideological framework that views African reality as a continuing struggle against Western cultural imperialism.

It would seem, therefore, that African ideological and intellectual expression is still largely determined by what Abiola Irele called "our pathology of alienation" as a colonised people.

He writes: "It is not so much the fact that our modern literature has explored the theme of culture conflict that strikes one now, as that it has determined a fixation upon this pathology of alienation, and thus conditioned our emotional and intellectual reflexes to the whole subject of our relationship to Europe and Western civilisation."

These intellectual and emotional reflexes can be seen in the reactions to *The Last King of Scotland*, a movie about the late Ugandan tyrant; in the reactions to Madonna's adoption of

Mercy, an orphan who was reduced to cultural nationalism's latest exhibit in its body of evidence against Western imperialism.

It was the same attitude at work when advocates of human rights were criticised as purveyors of Western imperialism.

The problem with these responses is that they tend to privilege the ideological argument over the underlying socio-political problems that are the subject of these stories or interventions.

In the case of Kony 2012, the discussion really should be why we have not put Kony as an urgent item on our national and AU agendas.

The Madonna case should have focused us on the underdevelopment of Malawi by its politicians, a state of affairs that produces so many children like Mercy.

And in the case of the Amin movie, our intellectual efforts should be directed at ending Africa's remaining dictatorships a la Robert Mugabe.

But just as important, the reality of global interdependence, the growing acceptance of the universalism of democratic values, the reality of personal and business linkages across racial and geographical divides, growing similarities in middle class experience from Nairobi to Mumbai, the Internet, etc, a phenomenon described by Benjamin Barber as the "McWorld," indicates that we should be moving beyond the colonial and post-colonial discourse, and begin defining an ideology that makes sense of the rapidly changing world around us.

The African experience has grown beyond the prescriptive terms of ideologies based on cultural nationalism, and the phenomenon of McWorld will mean that cultural autonomy is no longer a feasible concept.

The African experience will be told from different perspectives by different players; African crises will have multiple interventions, all of which will occupy different points on the good-bad continuum.

Sitting back in our armchairs, patting our Kente robes and waiting to hurl criticism at the next "transgression" is an unhelpful exercise.

If you think a story has been told wrongly, then tell it the way you think it should be told.

As Ghanaian-American writer Malaka Grant wrote in a blog post titled "Joseph Kony is still at large and it's all my fault":

"...Here's a better question: Why did an African not start the Kony 2012 campaign?"

I would recommend the same attitude towards our development project. If colonialism left few doctors, train more.

If they did not develop manufacturing, develop it. Like the Nike brand exhorts: Just do it!

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