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KONY 2012, Military Humanitarianism, and the Magic of Occult Economies

Sverker Finnström

Abstract: The global success of the film *KONY 2012* by Invisible Children, Inc., manifests far greater magical powers than those of Joseph Kony and his ruthless Lord's Resistance Army, which it portrays. The most prominent feature of the Invisible Children lobby is the making and constant remaking of a master narrative that depoliticizes and dehistoricizes a murky reality of globalized war into an essentialized black-and-white story. The magic of such a digestible storyline, with Ugandan rebel leader Joseph Kony as a global poster boy for evil personified, not only plays into the hands of the oppressive Ugandan government but has also become handy for the US armed forces as they seek to increase their presence on the African continent. As the US-led war on terror is renewed and expanded, Invisible Children's humanitarian slogan, "Stop at nothing", has proven to be exceptionally selective, manifesting the occult economy of global activism that calls for military interventions.

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Keywords: Uganda, Central Africa, films, civil wars, military intervention, Lord's Resistance Army (LRA)

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Invisible Children's ability to attract young people across the globe with the film *KONY 2012* (dir. Jason Russell; 2012) is a manifestation of far greater magical powers than those of Joseph Kony and his ruthless Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), which the film portrays. Following a mainstream media trend, Invisible Children, Inc., conveniently reduces a very complex conflict, with northern Uganda as its historical epicentre, to a colonialist "Heart of Darkness" stereotype of primitiveness. This lobbying organization brings to mind Bronislaw Malinowski's 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" (1979 [1931]: 43). But if we update the Malinowskian legacy, 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.

Yet magic is also about power and powerlessness, the visible and indeed what is rendered invisible. Along the lines of anthropologist Erica Caple James' (2012) analysis of the social life of aid and development "bureaucraft" in Haiti, what we have seen with Invisible Children's massive lobby is the ultimate manifestation of a global humanitarian and military economy which is profoundly occult. Drawing on contemporary anthropological analyses from all over the world, James describes occult economies as ranging "from illicit or unregulated traffic in commodities or other tangible and intangible items of value to the hidden transactions between individuals and 'magical' forces to attain both spiritual and material power" (2012: 56-7). Perhaps the now world-famous *KONY 2012* action kit – complete with t-shirts, posters, stickers, pins, and even personal bracelets – is one such magical commodity. For example, the Invisible Children campaigners tell their followers that the bracelet with the *KONY 2012* inscription should be worn only during 2012, as the film and the campaign magically expire on 31 December 2012. Essential to occult economies, to again quote James (2012: 57), are "practices of abstraction by which value or profit is extracted by the few from the labour, bodies, or resources of others".

So if magic is a process of attaining visible and invisible powers by way of abstraction, as I suggest, the Invisible Children lobby demonstrates that such socio-cultural abstractions involve active decisions *not* to understand. But the process goes further than that: Here, again, I turn to anthropology. In *Weaponizing Anthropology*, a powerful critique of the US armed forces' global mapping of their enemies, so-called "human terrain mapping", David H. Price shows that such charts "create fictions more than they simplify" (2011: 6). In other words, social scientists mapping the human terrain for the US armed forces do not simply identify any enemies "out there" in the non-Western

wilderness, but they, in fact, make up the enemy. In similarly Manichaean terms, the Invisible Children lobby has created a very successful global fiction rather than describing any contemporary social African reality.

With *KONY 2012*, Invisible Children is now fully a part of the magic of globalized war. As is most often the case, this war is produced and reproduced not because African cultures are particularly prone to violence – they are not – but because of the emplacement of global forces, including Euro-American imaginations, on the African scene.

This film and its lesser-known sequels, *Part II – Beyond Famous* (dir. Ben Keeseey and Kathryn Lang; 2012) and *MOVE* (dir. Jason Russell and Jedidiah Jenkins; 2012), are three of the most recent of a series of Invisible Children films, all part of an intense and innovative media campaign in the US. The first Invisible Children film, *Rough Cut* (dir. Jason Russell, Laren Poole and Bobby Bailey; 2004), captivated the hearts, minds, and actions of countless American high school and college students. This first film framed a clear agenda; money would be collected so that schools could be built for former child soldiers in Uganda. During the years that followed, the agenda was reformulated. More focus was placed on the production of films and increased lobbying in the US. When *KONY 2012* hit the world, two-thirds of the donated money was used by Invisible Children to cover the costs of the film production and lobbying.

In one of the films from 2009, there are hints of a new message. Using a dramaturgy that speaks directly to the emotions of the viewers, shots of the CIA's logotype and American military helicopters are shown. The message is that only US intelligence and armed intervention can stop the LRA's never-ending campaign of violence in east-central Africa. Only with US military assistance can LRA leaders, indicted by the International Criminal Court (ICC) for war crimes and crimes against humanity, be apprehended. The trust in US global (military) policing is a sad irony of historical and political ignorance, given that back in 1961 the CIA was implicated in partaking in the plot to murder Congolese politician Patrice Lumumba, to have his body dismembered and dissolved in acid, and to facilitate Mobutu's military takeover (see Branch 2011: 238). Still, Invisible Children's lobbying led to US President Obama ordering one hundred "military advisors" to follow the US troops who were already on the ground supporting the Ugandan army, as he announced in October 2011. The US, while fiercely rejecting any jurisdiction of the ICC over US crimes, and declaring the Islamist expansion in Sudan and Somalia a threat to US interests, hereby secured yet another geographical warfront in its global war on terror, on yet another continent. With this bigger picture in mind, one might ask what the Invisible Children lobbyists really mean by their powerful slogan, "Stop at nothing"?

The most prominent feature of the Invisible Children films is the creation and constant re-creation of a magical master narrative; the lobby reduces, depoliticizes and dehistoricizes a murky reality of globalized war into an essentialized black-and-white story that pits the modern Ugandan government and its international partners against the barbarian LRA. Moreover, in the process of reinforcing these categorical differences, it pathologizes an entire ethnic group, the Acholi of northern Uganda. In Invisible Children's *Rough Cut*, there is a part of the film called "The Mental State". Pictures of four mentally ill persons – by then all well-known characters in Gulu in northern Uganda, where the film was shot – frame the narrative. One of them is even interviewed, and he is evidently drunk. This is the only voice critical of the Ugandan government's brutal counterinsurgent campaign that the film presents, but the man's incomprehensible proclamations invalidate any political criticism they may contain. Further, the Invisible Children filmmakers implicitly borrow a diagnosis from unbalanced and even mentally ill individuals to illustrate and describe the whole of northern Uganda. The impression given is stereotypical, that of a psychologically unhealthy culture. They then continue to use their own ethnocentric imaginations to generalize about a whole continent, as evidenced by the film immediately thereafter proceeding to use images of child soldiers from West Africa to strengthen its narrative (see also Finnström 2008: 111, 170).

The magic of this digestible and dichotomizing storyline plays nicely into the hands of the Ugandan government. In fact, some of the very same child soldiers shown in *Rough Cut* also appear in documentaries on children who fought under the current president of Uganda, Yoweri Museveni, in the 1980s – when Museveni himself was a rebel leader attempting a military takeover of Kampala, the Ugandan capital. *Rough Cut* can be juxtaposed with a Danish documentary on Museveni's military struggles, *In a Soldier's Footsteps* (dir. Mette Zeruneith; 2005). Same kids, but different films with different rebel armies during different decades.¹ Moreover, in 2010 when a number of US-based human rights organizations protested against President Obama's decision to waive the application of the Child Soldiers Prevention Act of 2008 to Chad, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), the two Sudans and Yemen because he claimed it was "in the national interest of the United

1 Both films are available on YouTube. The very same footage of (LRA) child soldiers that appears at the 24:56 mark of *Rough Cut* also appears at the 2:19 mark of *In a Soldier's Footsteps*, though in the latter film they are not described as LRA fighters, but as the child soldiers of Museveni's National Resistance Army. Another sequence that appears at the 25:50 mark of *Rough Cut* also appears at the 2:05 mark of *In a Soldier's Footsteps*. In other words, even if built upon the very same footage (or "raw data", if you like), at the end of the day two very different stories are told.

States” to do so, Invisible Children chose not to co-sign the official joint protest by the African Centre for Justice and Peace Studies and partner organizations (2010). In other words, Obama claimed – and Invisible Children was actively silent on the matter – that child soldiers can be warranted as long as they are allies in the US-led war on terror. One might again ask what the slogan “Stop at nothing” really means; is it not a telling example of the production of global shadows with *some* child soldiers still rendered invisible, and thus of the selectiveness by which (in)justice is realized?

The mainstream portrayal of the LRA, and also of conflicts on the African continent in general, is not without implications, as we now know from *KONY 2012*. Over the years, President Museveni has described his enemies and political opponents as hyenas and a bunch of criminals driven by primitiveness and backwardness, witchcraft and mysticism, even obscurantism – an effective recycling of the most essentialist colonial stereotypes about primitive savages in darkest Africa (see Finnström 2010). But even General Carter Ham, who had recently become the head of the US Africa Command (AFRICOM), joined the black-and-white choir, declaring in October 2011,

I have to tell you, six months ago, I didn’t know anything about the Lord’s Resistance Army. 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 (US Africa Command 2011).

Sadly enough, it seems that General Ham’s political analysis has a lot in common with that of filmmaker Jason Russell’s four-year-old son, who appears as a central character in *KONY 2012*. And this very fictionalization is the magic of travelling stories: The “good guys” on the actual battlefields are not necessarily 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. Indeed, to again reference Price (2011), what we see here is the militaristic creation of a fiction rather than merely a simplified description of a particular part of Africa.

This fiction has real-life consequences. For example, the LRA commander who carried out the 2008 “Christmas Day massacre” in Faradje in the DRC in which 143 people were brutally murdered, and which was globally reported on, has since defected and joined the “good” side: He has silently worked alongside the Ugandan and American forces to assist in the hunt for Kony (see Finnström 2013). Limited in scope and mandate, the ICC has not carried out any investigation on him – his alliance with the “good” side magically sanctifies him in spite of his history of violent war crimes.

If global activism and social engagement are to be respected and taken seriously – on the Internet and beyond – it must be understood that the abstraction and the occult consumption of African conflicts that I have sketched out here have far-reaching consequences. The American military intervention, promoted by Invisible Children as essential to any solution, has itself been described by a US army officer on the ground this way: “These ex-LRA guys don’t have many skills, and it’s going to be hard for them to reintegrate,” he said to the *New York Times*. “But one thing they are very good at is hunting human beings in the woods” (10 April 2010). With a statement like this in mind, we ought to be more uncomfortable than ever with President Obama’s waiving of the Child Soldiers Prevention Act for some of the very countries where the LRA is active.

Such magical abstractions beg the following 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 a trailer for *KONY 2012*? I must disagree with this statement and I believe jumping on the *KONY 2012* bandwagon is dangerous – people who want to help create a better world should study history. It is ironic that the cover of the original *Rough Cut* film displayed a quote from Margaret Mead, where she refers to “committed citizens” changing the world. When I received the Margaret Mead Award for my book on the war in northern Uganda (Finnström 2008), in my award speech I secretly referenced the Invisible Children lobby by referring to the same quote:

There are some important books out there now that take us beyond the many stereotypical journalistic 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 on the viral Invisible Children lobby. The 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. The world viewing Joseph Kony as a global poster boy for Africa’s problems will, to be sure, make things worse for him; however, the increased foreign and domestic military presence will also serve to further militarize the region as a whole, as governments sending armed forces can justify their actions by magically

referring back to Kony, the global scapegoat. “As long as Kony is there in the bush,” a friend and longtime informant told me with resignation when I 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 lead to justice in this war-ravaged region. Out there in those unknown woods of central Africa – to combine the mystical and mythical imageries of the two AFRICOM representatives quoted above – is real evil and thus the essence of human terrain mapping: a never-ending, multilayered, and truly strange hunt for characters who are no longer fellow human beings. Here, if anything, is the production of magic. Again, there is something occult to the renewed war on terror and this global humanitarian economy of power and powerlessness; *KONY 2012* is possibly only a symptom of this.

In this short piece I have provided just a few examples of Invisible Children’s systematic and decade-long exploitation of images, quotes and footage that have not always been theirs to exploit, but by which they have promoted a story that is exceptionally one-dimensional. But as the media storm caused by *KONY 2012* seems to have faded out, there is yet another irony to the whole affair: Invisible Children is now threatening to take Kickstriker.com, a group of New York University graduate students, to court. Kickstriker’s parody of the *KONY 2012* campaign, Invisible Children claims, is

causing public confusion through [its] use of Invisible Children’s copyrighted and trademarked property [...]. This impermissible use is a blatant and egregious infringement of Invisible Children’s valuable copyright and trademark rights [...and...] failure to cease and desist [its] unlawful use of Invisible Children’s intellectual property will result in legal action (Invisible Children statement quoted by Spencer Ackerman of *Wired’s* Danger Room blog, 19 June 2012).

And so the LRA saga enters the domestic US court system. This court battle of trademark claims and counterclaims seems rather disconnected from the violent realities of central Africa, where the LRA is still active today. With American lawyers eventually defining the ownership of the “true” LRA story, could there be a more depressing illustration of the magic of travelling stories and, indeed, of the workings of occult economies? Perhaps the next step will be for LRA leader Joseph Kony to claim some royalties.

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KONY 2012, militärische Humanität und die Magie verborgener Wirtschaftsbeziehungen

Zusammenfassung: Der weltweite Erfolg des Films *KONY 2012* von Invisible Children, Inc. offenbart weit stärkere magische Kräfte, als sie dem darin portraitierten Joseph Kony und seiner skrupellosen „Lord's Resistance Army“ zugeschrieben werden. Die wichtigste Wirkung der Lobbyarbeit von Invisible Children besteht darin, die finstere Realität des globalisierten Krieges zu entpolitisieren, zu enthistorisieren und auf ein immer neu variiertes Schwarz-Weiß-Denkmal zu reduzieren. Die magische Wirkung einer solchen leicht verwertbaren inhaltlichen Reduktion – mit dem ugandischen Rebellenführer Joseph Kony als globalem Inbegriff des personifizierten Bösen – liegt im Interesse der

repressiven ugandischen Regierung, insbesondere aber auch der US-Streitkräfte, die ihre Präsenz auf dem afrikanischen Kontinent verstärken wollen. Während der US-geführte Krieg gegen den Terror wieder aufgenommen und ausgeweitet wird, hat sich der von Invisible Children genutzte Slogan „Stop at nothing“ als außerordentlich wirksam erwiesen und die verborgene wirtschaftliche Logik eines globalen Aktivismus offenbart, der nach militärischen Interventionen ruft.

Schlagwörter: Uganda, Zentralafrika, Film, Bürgerkrieg, Militärische Intervention, Lord's Resistance Army (LRA)