

HUMANITARIAN DEATH AND THE MAGIC OF GLOBAL WAR IN UGANDA



Sverker Finnström

In this short and preliminary essay, I revisit a few months of intensive fieldwork conducted in late 2005. This spell in the field was part of a much longer engagement with war-torn northern Uganda that began in 1997 and is still ongoing. In 2005, I could follow closely the unfolding of local news as the International Criminal Court (ICC) unsealed its warrants of arrest for the Lord's Resistance Army/Movement (LRA/M, or simply LRA) leadership. I will draw examples from the *New Vision* and the *Daily Monitor*, two Ugandan newspapers—the first state-controlled, the second independent—that I always follow carefully during my fieldwork stints. From this fieldwork horizon, I will sketch a violent intersection of international interventions and insurgency/counter-insurgency warfare.

For more than two decades, the LRA has fought the Ugandan army. In recent years, the LRA has gone regional, with the army always in pursuit. The rebels established themselves in South Sudan in the early 1990s and in 2005 moved their main camps to northeastern Congo. Since then, their presence has extended into the Central

African Republic and even into Darfur. In the deep forests at the alleged global peripheries, helicopter gunships and US-supported Ugandan troops constantly try to eliminate the ever-evaporating and re-emerging LRA fighters. Local realities are deeply entangled with larger regional—even global—warscapes.

Magical Terror and Global War

I propose that ‘magical terror’ is primarily produced not by the so-called primitives of Africa but by the emplacement of global forces on the African scene. I furthermore suggest that magical terror is at the same time both physical and discursive and that one of its most prominent features is the production of an omnipresent Manichaeian master narrative that magically reduces a murky reality of war into extremes of black and white (see Finnström, forthcoming). It is a story of us versus them, victim against perpetrator, and the secularized and modern Ugandan government and its international partners in development defending the Ugandan citizenry against the primitive barbarians of the LRA.

The LRA’s human rights abuse record is horrendous. Among other things, they have abducted tens of thousands of minors, and by the turn of the millennium they had made themselves world-infamous for their wartime crimes. During my fieldwork in late 2005, the original ICC warrants were unsealed and immediately thereafter published in Ugandan newspapers. Rebel leader Joseph Kony was wanted for “thirty-three counts on the basis of his individual criminal responsibility,” including both war crimes and crimes against humanity (ICC 2005). Four other leaders were wanted as well. Okot Odhiambo’s warrant list included 10 counts. Dominic Ongwen, abducted into rebel

ranks when he was only ten years old, was to answer to 7 counts. Raska Lukwiya, killed in action in 2006 despite a formal ceasefire, had 5 counts to answer to. The warrant for Vincent Otti, number two in the rebel hierarchy, listed 32 counts. Otti eventually fell out with Kony, and in 2007 he was killed on Kony's orders.

In one of Africa's longest-running wars—starting in 1986 and still ongoing—the Ugandan army promotes itself as the rational and modern party to the conflict. Yoweri Museveni, the president of Uganda, has described his enemies in arms as a bunch of peasants and criminals, driven by intoxication, witchcraft, backwardness, mysticism, and obscurantism (see, e.g., Museveni 1992; cf. Finnström 2010a). He thereby recycles the most essentialist colonial stereotypes about primitive savages in darkest Africa. In addition, the language of denigration used by President Museveni and his associates has taken on a symbolic dimension that is accessible to the Ugandan public. Periodically, Museveni has branded rebel insurgents, as well as his political opponents, as 'hyenas' (Karugaba and Bwebale 2000; Muhangi 2002). By lumping them together and calling them hyenas, Museveni implies that they are wild creatures, which in many African cosmologies means that they have vitality and power, but also that they represent the uncultured wilderness, the realm of danger, depredation, death, sorcery, and witchcraft. "Hegemonic groups are able to define such a vocabulary, an ability that enables them to identify opposition and protest as witchcraft, banditry, and terrorism," wrote Winans (1992: 110), with reference to south-central Tanzania on the eve of its independence.

Of course, Kony and his LRA fighters have made themselves co-authors in the violent process of magical terror. They are responsible for the worst crimes against humanity that can be imagined. Yet the complex developments that led to the ICC intervention are not my immediate focus

in this short essay.¹ Rather, I want to revisit the argument put forward by Olara Otunnu, a Ugandan opposition politician and the former Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations and Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict. Otunnu (2006: 45) contends that “[t]o keep the eyes of the world averted, the [Ugandan] government has carefully scripted a narrative in which the catastrophe in northern Uganda begins with the LRA and will only end with its demise.” Starting with this claim, I will now proceed to outline the violent realpolitik that unfolded on the ground after the unsealing of the ICC warrants.

The Death of Joseph Kapere

In late December 2005, the Ugandan army airlifted a group of journalists for a press briefing that was held deep in the war-torn bush of Pader district in northern Uganda. This particular area, nicknamed Kandahar in the local parlance, was known for the fierce fighting that had taken place for years between the army and the LRA. There, lying in the scorched grass of the hot dry season, was the body of Brigadier Joseph Kapere, on display for the journalists. At the time, Kapere had been one of the most senior LRA field commanders operating inside Uganda, while the majority of the high command was in South Sudan or in new bases in the forests of northeast Congo. It happens now and then that the Ugandan army purposely leaves dead bodies behind as warnings, so that potential rebel supporters appreciate the danger of opposing the government (Finnström 2008: 88). This time, the Ugandan army’s propaganda machinery created a media spectacle of the successful killing of a senior rebel commander.

They army had done so a few months earlier as well, claiming to have killed Dominic Ongwen, one of the LRA

commanders wanted by the ICC. “Ongwen was buried on October 1,” wrote reporters for the *New Vision*, “after his body was paraded at Soroti Public gardens” (Moro, Omoding, and Opolot 2005). The story in the state-controlled daily was illustrated with a color photo of Ongwen’s presumed body being exhumed for DNA testing on behalf of the ICC. But the army was mistaken: the body on display for journalists, it eventually turned out, was not that of Ongwen. When a temporary ceasefire and peace talks commencing in 2006 were announced, Ongwen magically reappeared, as reported by Ugandan media at the time, and he soon joined the rest of the high command in the Congo base camps. Consequently, in July 2006, the ICC unsealed the DNA test results, confirming that there was no match between Ongwen and the tested body.

The death of Kapere in December 2005, however, was final, and the public display of his dirty and bloody body was a direct illustration of magical terror and its war propaganda. Again, the *New Vision* reported the story. A color photo of Kapere’s body, surrounded by the Uganda People’s Defence Forces (UPDF) dignitaries of the day, appeared on the front page, along with a report: “Kapere was killed in an ambush ... in Atanga sub-county, Aruu county, Pader district ... Journalists were taken to view Kapere’s body. Present during the press briefing were the jovial UPDF acting 601-brigade commander, Maj. Joseph Balikudembe, flanked by the UPDF 4th division intelligence officer, Maj. Mike Kisame and the 5th division spy chief Maj. Ddamulira Sserunjogi” (Ochowun 2005).

A few months before this spectacular event, and just after the unsealing of the ICC arrest warrants, rumors had started to circulate about the LRA’s growing annoyance at the warrants on their leaders’ heads. It was even rumored that they had issued a ‘counter-warrant’—that humanitarian aid workers and expatriates should leave northern

Uganda, or they would be killed. As the rumors continued to fly and the stories persisted, the name of Brigadier Kapere figured frequently in them.

When I tried to investigate this matter during my fieldwork in 2005, I was met with firm denials from representatives of the Ugandan government and its army. I recognized the politics of denial from my previous research efforts: at that time, the existence of actual political manifestos of the rebels had been fiercely denied, by both government officials and international humanitarians. Now, as then, officials and humanitarians who I knew for a fact had information—or even copies of rebel documents and written statements—issued point-blank denials during interviews with me (see Finnström 2008: 99–130; 2010a).

Nonetheless, an acquaintance of mine provided me with a copy of the rebels' written response to the ICC warrants. According to one version, the statement was delivered by the rebels directly to local elders in the war-torn north; according to another, it ended up with the British High Commission in Kampala, Uganda's capital. Either way, the letter was photocopied and distributed widely in the closed corridors of power in Kampala. Soon after, a number of international organizations threatened to suspend operations in northern Uganda. The person who gave me the letter had attended a UN meeting where it had been discussed. The handwritten letter, reproduced here, reads in part:

Make sure that the ICC question is answered and we have been directed to kill any white person moving anyhow in this region, they come like NGOs but they are the one talking bad about LRA, so you should also know that white people are like Museveni.

[Signed]

Brigadier Kapere
FOR LORDS RESISTANCE ARMY

This threat was real. Balam Bongonyinge, a Ugandan working with ACCORD, an NGO, was killed and five of his colleagues injured in an LRA ambush in late October 2005. Another aid worker, this time from Caritas, was killed in a separate ambush. After these ambushes, most humanitarian aid organizations suspended their operations.²

The Death of Steve Willis

Of all the wartime deaths in late 2005, perhaps the most widely reported, in both Uganda and beyond, was the killing of a British citizen, Steve Willis, on 8 November 2005. Soon after rebel commander Kapere had issued his letter, Willis and his travel party were ambushed by the LRA inside Murchison Falls National Park, which is located on the frontiers of the immediate war zone. Interviewed by the *New Vision*, Ugandan army Brigadier Nathan Mugisha immediately declared the ambush an “isolated incident” (Allio 2005). But in all its sadness, it was a rather typical rebel ambush, with no magic to it whatsoever. After some 20 years of low-intensity warfare between the LRA and the Ugandan army, with a history of countless rebel ambushes just like this one and, indeed, a number of army ambushes on civilians as well, the attack was in no way an isolated incident; rather, it was part of a systematic pattern of wartime violence. In the experience of Ugandans living in the immediate war zone, there are periods when ambushes happen on a daily basis, something that has sustained the experience of war, making it and its multiple forms of violence routines among other routines in everyday life.

But the explicit targeting of humanitarian organizations and expatriates was something new. Without warning, Willis's four-wheel-drive vehicle was sprayed with bullets. LRA fighters immediately entered the scene to loot items that they usually need—batteries for their communication radios, seat belts to be used as shoulder straps on backpacks, cash, and clothes. Willis's fellow travelers survived by jumping out through the windows of the vehicle and hiding in the bush. However, Willis, behind the wheel, unfortunately died in the initial shooting. A few days before this ambush, a different rebel unit had ambushed and killed another Briton, this time in the borderlands between Uganda and Sudan. The deceased had been working with International Aid Services, a relief and development organization (Osike 2005). Some days previous to this attack, two mine-clearance experts were killed in yet another LRA ambush in South Sudan (Agencies Sudan 2005).

New Zealander Cam McLeay (2005), who had traveled with Willis, wrote a survivor's first-hand account for the *New Vision*:

The Uganda Peoples Defence Forces (UPDF) acted in an exemplary manner in responding to the ambush. Within minutes of hearing of the attack, Brig. Nathan Mugisha had ordered a military helicopter to the scene fully equipped for such a tragedy with paramedics on board. The helicopter was supported on the ground by two armoured personnel carriers which arrived swiftly on the scene. Under the command of Lt. Col. Kidega, there can be no other army in the world that could have responded in a more professional or timely manner. The expedition team ... and myself would like to express our sincere thanks to President Yoweri Museveni, Brig. Mugisha, Lt. Col. Kidega and the entire UPDF 4th Division for responding so swiftly in coming to our rescue.

Humanitarian Death

For Ugandan authorities, McLeay's praise of the Ugandan army as the world's most professional, published by the state-controlled *New Vision*, was timely. In 2003, the army had charged several international human rights bodies with propagating the cause of the LRA. For example, Human Rights Watch (2003) had published a report on Uganda that criticized not only the rebels but also the conduct of the Ugandan armed forces. An army spokesperson immediately "dismissed the report as the work of those bent on mobilising for the LRA," reported Jabweli (2003) in the *New Vision*. Then, during my fieldwork in 2005, Human Rights Watch (2005) launched a new and equally critical report. In a long *New Vision* article, Amama Mbabazi (2005), at the time minister of defence, wrote that the Human Rights Watch report was "unfounded, partisan and politically motivated" and a "deliberate attempt to distort the truth" with "outrageous allegations." In a press conference preceding his published assessment, Mbabazi demanded that the 2005 report be withdrawn because of its "sweeping statements which read as political pamphlets of the Uganda political opposition" built on "street talk" (quoted in Nyakairu 2005).

Human Rights Watch had rebuttals published in Ugandan papers, and the issue was debated in the country. Many Ugandan commentators, as well as my informants, considered the stand of the Ugandan government to be ridiculous. But around the same time, the Uganda Human Rights Commissions (UHRC) also published a report, and it contrasted with that of Human Rights Watch. As reported by the state-controlled *New Vision*, the UHRC claimed that the human rights record had improved in Uganda (Mugisa 2005). Interestingly, a few months earlier, the Ugandan prime minister had stopped human rights activists from

filming in camps for internally displaced persons in the war-torn north, arguing that a number of documentaries had portrayed a negative image of Uganda that would affect its relationships with its international partners in development (Masumbuko 2005). In fact, an increasing number of Ugandan commentators and academics had started to ask why the ICC did not proceed with investigations of the Ugandan army's arbitrary killing and rape of civilians, torture, forced labor at gunpoint, and forced displacement of millions of people to squalid camps with mortality rates reaching in excess of 1,000 Ugandans per week in 2005 (WHO 2005). All of these actions are potential crimes against humanity. But the debate on government abuses soon evaporated, as the international radar of attention again focused on the "pointless terrorist activities against innocent civilian" of the LRA, "which cowardly attacks unarmed civilians [and] retreats animal-like into the bush at the first sign of any engagement," to quote again from McLeay's (2005) account of Willis's death.

As in much government rhetoric, here too the rebels are portrayed as animals of the uncultured wilderness. Perhaps to the satisfaction of the Ugandan government, the hyenas were back—if not in town itself, surely in the surrounding bushes. Few external observers paid any further attention to the debate on human rights abuses committed by the government forces. With the killing of Kapere, and even more so because of the public display of his bullet-ridden body, the Ugandan army magically managed to retake the initiative in the wartime propaganda battle. With Kapere's death, the Ugandan army also admitted, even if only implicitly, that the rebel attacks, in all their brutality, had been quite well-coordinated. In December 2005, as Kapere's body was displayed to the media crowd, I could also read in the *New Vision* Maj. Balikudembe's declaration that "Kapere had written a letter threatening

to kill charity workers based in the north. Many NGOs threatened to withdraw from the area after LRA killed two workers” (Ochowun 2005).

A Conclusion without Closure

Above I have given examples of a Manichaean vocabulary. In the hands of dominant groups, it has, at least in part, helped to perpetuate regional war, contributing to the globalizing of war that this volume deals with. It is a magical vocabulary that enables those in power to denounce opposition and protest as witchcraft, banditry, and terrorism, as Winans (1992) pointed out. The hyenas are always and only on the side of the enemy. In revisiting those months of fieldwork in 2005, and in acknowledging the tragic deaths of Steve Willis and others, I maintain that a simplified picture was drawn for the public. When it comes to the war in northern Uganda, the government has always had the upper hand in defining the discourse on meaning, while the LRA, as the obvious co-authors in the process of war, were to occupy the sole moral category of evil. Still in 2011, with the Ugandan conflict being exported to neighboring countries, as far away as the Central African Republic and Darfur, nothing has really changed in this regard. The static categorizing probably represents one of the most prevalent instances of magic, for it sustains conflict by describing an opponent as singularly evil. Any alternatives are rendered invisible.

Now and then during fieldwork, I hear from my informants that rebel leader Joseph Kony, after being told for many years that he is a terrorist—which he obviously is—has decided to become one. In 2002, one young man expressed what he imagined to be Kony’s way of

reasoning: “They say that I am a terrorist. Well, let it be so, and let me then give them terrorism.” Such a self-confession to terrorism can be interpreted as an effort to recover political agency that is denied in official discourse. On the road of no return, perhaps the elusive LRA leader, wanted by international justice, has decided to do something that nobody seems able to avoid in contemporary conflicts, in war mediated by written or other media—that is, “to become his fate, to live it as though he himself had conceived it” (Jackson 1989: 101).

Acknowledgments

This short essay reports from a research project on global war and transnational (in)justice, funded by The Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Foundation. It is an outline version of a full-length article in a forthcoming volume, *Virtual War and Magical Death: Technologies and Imaginaries for Terror and Killing*, edited by Neil L. Whitehead and Sverker Finnström, to be published by Duke University Press.

Notes

1. For more detailed analyses of the ICC intervention in northern Uganda, see, for example, Allen (2006), Branch (2007), and Finnström (2010b).
2. “Aid Agencies Stop Work in North,” *Sunday Monitor*, 30 October 2005.

References

- Agencies Sudan. 2005. "LRA Rebels Kill Mine Experts." *Daily Monitor*, 2 November.
- Allen, Tim. 2006. *Trial Justice: The International Criminal Court and the Lord's Resistance Army*. London: Zed Books.
- Allio, Emmy. 2005. "Briton Rejected Escort." *New Vision*, 10 November.
- Branch, Adam. 2007. "Uganda's Civil War and the Politics of ICC Intervention." *Ethics and International Affairs* 21, no. 2: 179–198.
- Finnström, Sverker. 2008. *Living with Bad Surroundings: War, History, and Everyday Moments in Northern Uganda*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- _____. 2010a. "An African Hell of Colonial Imagination? The Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda, Another Story." Pp. 74–89 in *The Lord's Resistance Army: Myth and Reality*, ed. Tim Allen and Koen Vlassenroot. London: Zed Books.
- _____. 2010b. "Reconciliation Grown Bitter? War, Retribution, and Ritual Action in Northern Uganda." Pp. 135–156 in *Localizing Transitional Justice: Interventions and Priorities after Mass Violence*, ed. Rosalind Shaw and Lars Waldorf, with Pierre Hazan. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- _____. Forthcoming. "Magic, Intervention, and Global War in Uganda." In *Virtual War and Magical Death: Technologies and Imaginaries for Terror and Killing*, ed. Neil L. Whitehead and Sverker Finnström. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Human Rights Watch. 2003. "Abducted and Abused: Renewed Conflict in Northern Uganda." <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/45dac8872.html> (accessed 11 July 2003).
- _____. 2005. "Uprooted and Forgotten: Impunity and Human Rights Abuses in Northern Uganda." <http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/uganda0905.pdf> (accessed 1 November 2006).
- ICC (International Criminal Court). 2005. "No.: ICC20051410.056-EN." *Daily Monitor*, 17 October.
- Jabweli, Okello. 2003. "Child Abuse High in War-Torn North." *New Vision*, 15 July.
- Jackson, Michael. 1989. *Paths toward a Clearing: Radical Empiricism and Ethnographic Inquiry*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

- Karugaba, Michael, and Kagyenda wa Bwebale. 2000. "ADF Rebels are like Hyenas—Museveni." *Daily Monitor*, 16 February.
- Masumbuko, Emma. 2005. "Premier Stops Filming of Refugee Camps." *Daily Monitor*, 20 June.
- Mbabazi, Amama. 2005. "Is Human Rights Watch a Mouthpiece for the Opposition?" *New Vision*, 3 October.
- McLeay, Cam. 2005. "First-Hand Account of Steve Willis's Murder." *New Vision*, 16 November.
- Moro, John, John Omoding, and Job Opolot. 2005. "LRA Brigadier Killed in Teso." *New Vision*, 6 October.
- Mugisa, Anne. 2005. "Rights Record Has Improved—Report." *New Vision*, 27 September.
- Muhangi, Jossy. 2002. "Amin, Obote Were Hyenas—Museveni." *New Vision*, 25 March.
- Museveni, Yoweri K. 1992. *What Is Africa's Problem?* Ed. Elizabeth Kanyogonya. Kampala: NRM Publications.
- Nyakairu, Frank. 2005. "Govt Demands Withdrawal of Human Rights Report." *Daily Monitor*, 23 September.
- Ochowun, Chris. 2005. "Ex-LRA Kill Brig. Kapere." *New Vision*, 27 December.
- Osike, Felix. 2005. "LRA Kill British National." *New Vision*, 7 November.
- Otunnu, Olara A. 2006. "The Secret Genocide." *Foreign Policy*, no. 155: 45–46.
- WHO (World Health Organization). 2005. "Health and Mortality Survey among Internally Displaced Persons in Gulu, Kitgum and Pader Districts, Northern Uganda." <http://www.who.int/hac/crises/uga/sitreps/Ugandamortsurvey.pdf> (accessed 2 November 2006).
- Winans, Edgar. 1992. "Hyenas on the Border." Pp. 106–129 in *The Paths to Domination, Resistance and Terror*, ed. Carolyn Nordstrom and JoAnn Martin. Berkeley: University of California Press.