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## HUMANITARIAN DEATH AND THE MAGIC OF GLOBAL WAR IN UGANDA

Sverker Finnström

*Abstract:* In view of the 2005 unsealing of the International Criminal Court's arrest warrants for the Lord's Resistance Army/Movement leadership, this paper sketches a violent intersection of international interventions and war as played out in Uganda. By 2005 local realities had become firmly entangled with larger regional and even global warsapes, an entanglement that still today perpetuates conflicts in the wider region. The paper argues that the intersection of the local and the global is part of the magical terror of war, produced not primarily by any *Africanness* but in the emplacement of global forces *on* the African scene. A most prominent feature of magical terror is the making and constant remaking of a master narrative which reduces a murky reality of globalized war into a black-and-white story of the modern Ugandan government and its international partners in development defending the noncombatant citizenry against the Lord's Resistance Army/Movement.

*Keywords:* crimes against humanity, International Criminal Court, Lord's Resistance Army, Lord's Resistance Army/Movement, magical terror, Uganda, war crimes, war propaganda

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 starting in 1997 and 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 and 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/counterinsurgency warfare. For more than two decades, the LRA has fought the Ugandan army. In recent years, the LRA has gone regional, always pursued by the Ugandan army. The rebels established themselves in South Sudan in the early 1990s, and in 2005 they moved their main camps to northeastern Congo. Since then they have expanded their presence to the Central African Republic and even to Darfur. In the deep forests at the alleged global peripheries, helicopter gunships and U.S. supported Ugandan troops try to eliminate constantly evaporating and re-emerging LRA fighters. Local realities are deeply entangled with larger regional, even global, warsapes.

### **Magical Terror and Global War**

I propose that “magical terror” is produced not primarily *by* the often-claimed primitives of Africa, but in the emplacement of global forces *on* the African scene. Magical terror, I furthermore suggest, is at the same time both physical and discursive, and one of its most prominent features is the production of an omnipresent Manichaeian master narrative which 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 which together defend 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 papers. 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 (e.g., International Criminal Court 2005). Four other leaders were wanted as well. Okot Odhiambo's warrant list included ten counts. Dominic Ongwen, abducted into rebel ranks when he was only a ten-year-old, was to answer to seven counts. Raska Lukwiya, in 2006 killed in action despite a formal ceasefire, had five counts to answer to. The warrant for Vincent Otti, number two in the rebel hierarchy, listed thirty-two counts. Otti eventually fell out with Kony, and in 2007 he was killed on Kony's orders.

In one of Africa's now longest running war, 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 (e.g., Museveni 1992; cf. Finnström 2010a). Hereby he recycles the most essentialist colonial stereotypes about primitive savages in darkest Africa. But also, the language of denigration by President Museveni and his associates has taken a symbolic dimension accessible to the Ugandan public. Periodically, Museveni has branded rebel insurgents as well as political opponents "hyenas" (quoted, e.g., by Karugaba and Bwebale 2000; Muhangi 2002). To lump them together and call them hyenas implies that they are seen as wild creatures, which in many African cosmologies means that they have vitality and power, but more, 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,” writes Winans (1992: 110) with reference to southcentral Tanzania on the eve of independence.

Of course Kony and his LRA fighters have made themselves coauthors in the violent process of magical terror. They are responsible for the worst crimes against humanity we can imagine. Yet the complex developments foregoing the ICC intervention are not my immediate focus in this short essay (but see, e.g., Allen 2006; Branch 2007; Finnström 2010b). Rather I want to revisit the argument put forward by Olara Otunnu, a Ugandan opposition politician and former UN Under-Secretary-General and Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict, that “to 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” (Otunnu 2006: 45). Starting with this claim, I will now proceed to sketch the violent *realpolitik* that unfolded on the ground following 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 deep in the war-torn bush of Pader district, northern Uganda. This particular area, nicknamed Kandahar in the local parlance, was known for years of fierce fighting between the army and the LRA. There, in the scorched grass of the hot dry season, on display for the journalists, was the body of Brigadier Joseph Kapere, at the time 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 (see, e.g., Finnström 2008: 88). This time the Ugandan army’s propaganda machinery created a media spectacle of their

successful killing of such a senior rebel commander. The army had done so a few months earlier as well, when claiming to have killed Dominic Ongwen, one of the commanders wanted by the ICC. “Ongwen was buried on October 1,” writes the *New Vision*, “after his body was paraded at Soroti Public gardens” (Moro et al. 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 and the body on display for journalists, it eventually turned out, was not that of Ongwen. It was only with a temporary ceasefire and upcoming peace talks commencing in 2006 that 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 was however final, and the public display of his dirty and bloody body a most 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:

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 of the LRA’s growing annoyance at the warrants on their leaders’ heads. It was even rumored that they had issued their “counter warrant”—

humanitarian aid workers and expatriates should leave northern Uganda, or they would be killed. As the rumoring continued and the stories persisted, the name of LRA Brigadier Kapere figured frequently in them.

When I tried to investigate into the matter during my fieldwork in 2005, I was met with compact denial from representatives of the Ugandan government and its army. I recognized the politics of denial from my previous research efforts. Then the existence of actual political manifestos of the rebels had been fiercely denied, both by government officials and international humanitarians. Now as then, officials and humanitarians that I for a fact knew to have information or even copies of rebel documents and written statements, would deny so at point blank in interviews with me (see Finnström 2008: ch. 3; 2010a).

Still an acquaintance of mine now provided me with a copy of the rebels' written response to the ICC warrants. According to one version, the statement was given 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, and a number of international organizations soon threatened to suspend operations in northern Uganda. The person who gave me the letter attended a UN meeting where it had been discussed. The letter, here an exact reproduction of the handwritten original, 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

The threat was for real. Balam Bongonyinge, a Ugandan, was killed and five of his colleagues injured, in an LRA ambush in late October 2005. He was working with Accord, an international organization. Another aid worker, this time from Caritas, was killed in a separate ambush, and after these ambushes most humanitarian organizations did suspend their operations (*Sunday Monitor* 2005).

### **The Death of Steve Willis**

Of all those wartime deaths in late 2005, perhaps most widely reported of, in Uganda and beyond, was the killing of a Briton, Steve Willis, on 8 November 2005. Soon after rebel commander Kapere issued his letter, Willis and his travel party were ambushed by the LRA inside Murchison Falls National Park, 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” (in Allio 2005). But in all its sadness, it was a rather typical rebel ambush, with no magic to it whatsoever. After some twenty 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 any isolated incident but rather 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, Steve Willis’s four-wheel-drive vehicle was sprayed with bullets. LRA fighters immediately entered the scene to loot items they usually need—batteries for

their communication radios, seatbelts 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 some ran into hiding in the bush, but Willis, behind the wheel, unfortunately died in the initial shooting. A few days before the ambush on Willis and his co-travelers, on the borderlands between Uganda and Sudan a different rebel unit had ambushed and killed another Briton. This time the deceased had been working with International Aid Services, a relief and development organization (Osike 2005). Some days before the attack on International Aid Services, two mine-clearance experts were killed in yet another LRA ambush in southern Sudan (Agencies Sudan 2005).

New Zealander Cam McLeay, who traveled with Willis, wrote a survivor's firsthand 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. (McLeay 2005)

## **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 Ugandan army had charged several international human rights bodies as propagating the cause of the LRA. Human Rights Watch, for example, had published a report on Uganda, criticizing not only the rebels but the conduct of the Ugandan armed forces as well (Human Rights Watch 2003). An army spokesperson immediately "dismissed the report as the work of those bent on mobilising for the LRA," reports the *New Vision* (Jabweli 2003). And during my fieldwork in 2005, Human Rights Watch (2005) launched a new and equally critical report. In a long *New Vision* article, Amama Mbabazi, the Ugandan Minister of Defence, wrote that the report from Human Rights Watch was "unfounded, partisan and politically motivated" and a "deliberate attempt to distort the truth" with "outrageous allegations" (Mbabazi 2005). In a press conference preceding his published assessment, the minister demanded the 2005 report to be withdrawn, because its "sweeping statements which read as political pamphlets of the Uganda political opposition" built on "street talk" (Mbabazi quoted by 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, found the stand of the Ugandan government ridiculous. But around the same time, the Uganda Human Rights Commissions had a report published as well, and it contrasted with the Human Rights Watch report, instead stating, as reported by the state-controlled *New Vision*, 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 to Uganda's international partners in development (Masumbuko 2005). Indeed, an increasing number of Ugandan commentators and academics

had started to ask why the ICC did not proceed with any investigations of the Ugandan army's arbitrary killings and rape of civilians, torture, forced labor at gunpoint, or the forced displacement of millions of people to squalid camps with excess mortality levels reaching 1,000 Ugandans per week in 2005 (World Health Organization et al. 2005). All these developments are potential crimes against humanity. But the debate on government abuses soon evaporated, with the international radar of attention again focusing on the "pointless terrorist activities against innocent civilian" of the LRA, "which cowardly attacks unarmed civilians, retreats animal-like into the bush at the first sign of any engagement," to again quote McLeay's (2005) account of Steve Willis's tragic death.

As in much government rhetoric, also here 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. And with the killing of Kapere, even more so because of the public display of his bullet-ridden body, the Ugandan army magically managed to retake the initiative of the wartime propaganda. But also, with Kapere's death, the Ugandan army 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* that "the jovial UPDF acting 601-brigade commander" now declared 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 Manichaeic vocabulary, defined by dominant groups, that partly perpetuates global war today. It is a magical vocabulary that enables those in power to

identify opposition and protest as witchcraft, banditry, and terrorism, as Winans (1992) pointed out. The hyenas are always and only on the enemy side. In revisiting those months of fieldwork in 2005, and in acknowledging the sad deaths of Steve Willis and others, I maintain that a simplified picture was drawn in the public domain. When it comes to the war in northern Uganda, it has always been the Ugandan government that has had the upper hand in defining the discourse on meaning, while the LRA, as obvious coauthors in the process of war, has begun to occupy the single moral category of evil. Still in 2011, with the Ugandan conflict exported to neighboring countries, as far as to 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 rendering an opponent accessible to outsiders only as singularly evil. It is part of the magic that globalizes war.

Now and then during fieldwork I hear my informants say that rebel leader Joseph Kony, after many years of being told that he is a terrorist, something that he evidently is, has decided to be one. As one young man said to me back in 2002, when he imagined Joseph 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, otherwise denied in official discourse. On the road of no return, perhaps the elusive LRA leader, wanted by international justice, has decided to do something nobody seems able to avoid in contemporary conflicts, in war mediated by written or other media: "to become his fate, to live it as though he himself had conceived it" (Jackson 1989: 101).

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