

The Phenomenon of *Kony 2012*: A Teaching Guide

Barbara B. Brown, John Metzler, and Christine Root

Kony 2012, the video by Invisible Children that went viral in March, offers an extraordinary teaching moment, as millions of teens across the country now know and care about a Ugandan warlord named Joseph Kony and the abducted children forced to serve in his militia. Many of these American young people hope to play a role in bringing him to justice, through a military campaign involving both U.S. military advisors and local armies. The film's theme is classic social studies: war and social justice.

This guide provides four tools for teaching: discussion questions for media literacy, guidelines for teaching about an African crisis, background about Kony and the Lord's Resistance Army, and web resources for further exploration.

A. Analyzing the Video

Media literacy is a key goal in education today. We, and especially young people, learn through the media, much more than through print. Analyzing the *Kony 2012* video provides an opportunity for critical thinking. Using open-ended questions and critical inquiry, diverse perspectives can be heard and a variety of aspects investigated.

In order to have enough time for discussion, we recommend that students watch the video in advance, if possible (<http://vimeo.com/37119711>). This unofficial transcript of the video may be useful (<http://bit.ly/H54QnB>).

1. A few factual basics

- Who made the video?
- What audience did they create it for?
- Who speaks on the video? (Roughly how much time for each?)

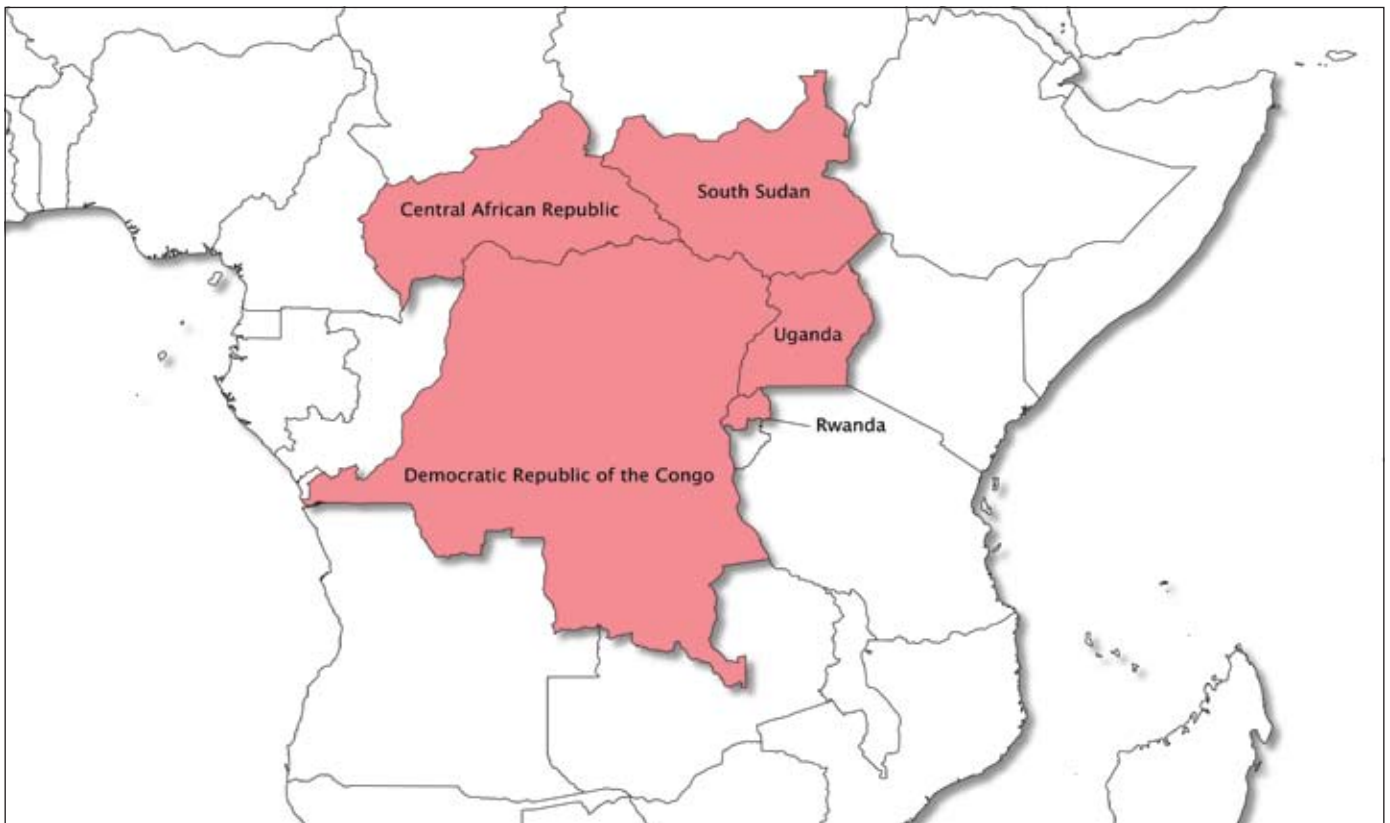
2. Analyzing the problem

- What are the main types of visuals used?
- What are the main topics or points?
- Do a content analysis of how much time is spent on each of the three main topics of the video: 1) showing the situation in Uganda, 2) encouraging American youth involvement, 3) advocating for U.S. (military) involvement?
- How much of the video time is spent in the United States? In Uganda?
- What did you learn about Uganda? (Is there more you would like to know?)
- As every conflict has its explanations or origins, what explanations are offered for this conflict?



AP Photo/John Mone, File

This photo shows a box of KONY posters at the Invisible Children Movement offices in San Diego on March 8, 2012. **What can our students learn from exploring the KONY 2012 campaign?**



Constructed by Anna Marie Melcher, Michigan State University

- What did you learn about the Central African region? (Kony is no longer in Uganda.)
- What goal does the video seek in order to achieve social justice?
- What specific strategies does the video endorse to achieve this goal?
- What additional information would you like, if any, (or questions you need answered) in order to understand or agree with the goal and the strategies to achieve this goal?
- After the *Kony 2012* video received wide publicity, it was shown to a large group in northern Uganda, a different audience than it was designed for. What problems did these Ugandans express in this 2:40 minute news report: www.youtube.com/watch?v=rU_1jnrj5VI?
- Understanding the larger context: What else do you know about Africa? Where did you learn this? (e.g., church, school, the news)?
- *Kony 2012* is a story about a grossly unjust man. Do you know of any positive movements or leadership within Africa for social justice?
- Are you familiar with the names and stories of any of the 10 African leaders who have won the Nobel Peace Prize? [These are: *Albert John Luthuli (South Africa)–1960; Anwar al-Sadat (Egypt)–1978; Bishop Desmond Tutu (South Africa)–1984; F.W. de Klerk and Nelson Mandela (both South Africa)–1993; Kofi Annan (Ghana)–2001; Wangari Maathai (Kenya)–2004; Mohamed Elbaradei (Egypt)–2005; Ellen Johnson Sirleaf (Liberia) and Leymah Gbowee (Liberia)–2011.*]

3. Analyzing the proposed solutions

- What solution does Invisible Children propose for ending this violence? Is it targeting an individual or an institution? [*Bringing Kony to the International Criminal Court (ICC), which has issued an indictment against Kony for war crimes*]
- What are the several strategies that Invisible Children wants used in order to bring Kony to justice? [*Sending U.S. military advisors to Uganda and funding the Ugandan army*]
 - What are the potential benefits of these strategies? What are the potential drawbacks?
 - Is there more you'd like to know?

A Brief Guide to the LRA and Joseph Kony

Patrick Vinck

The roots of the conflict in northern Uganda lie in a long-standing divide between north and south. Joseph Kony's Lord's Resistance Army, the LRA, grew out of this divide. From 1987 to 2006, the LRA fought the Ugandan government and terrorized the northern Ugandan population. Today the LRA is reduced to about 200 militia members. In 2006, they left Uganda but continue to plunder in neighboring countries.

The Conflict

Armed conflict erupted after President Museveni, from southern Uganda, seized power in 1986 from the northern-dominated government and its army. After Museveni's coup, the Ugandan army committed revenge killings and massacres against people of the north that fueled resentment and led to the emergence of several rebellions.

The LRA emerged in this context, headed by Joseph Kony, a former army commander with little formal education. Kony saw himself as a messenger of God and a liberator of the Acholi people (a large ethnic group in northern Uganda), with his own beliefs and rituals. Joseph Kony, however, failed to garner support from the population and local leaders. He increasingly turned against civilians, accusing them of aiding the government in seeking his defeat.

The conflict in northern Uganda escalated, resulting in large-scale killings, abductions, and mutilations of civilians. By the end of 2005, more than 1.8 million people had been displaced into squalid camps. To fill its ranks, the LRA abducted as many as 60,000 civilians, often children, to serve as porters, soldiers, or sexual and domestic servants. LRA human rights abuses have been extreme. While fighting the LRA, the Ugandan army has also recruited children, committed torture and killings against civilians, and destroyed civilian targets.

Ending the War

A number of attempts have been made over the last 20 years to end the war. Large-scale military campaigns have failed to capture Joseph Kony. With a vicious war continuing, the newly established International Criminal Court (ICC) began to investigate the situation in northern Uganda. In 2005, it released a warrant for the arrest of Kony and his top commanders. Peace talks, as recently as 2007, have also failed to end the conflict. Nevertheless, the LRA has been substantially weakened by successive military attacks and offers of amnesty to LRA forces who defect.

In 2006, Kony withdrew the LRA from northern Uganda and moved to the neighboring countries of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Central African Republic (CAR), and South Sudan, where he could once again hide and continue marauding. Since 2008, the Ugandan army has crossed the border into the CAR and DRC to fight the LRA, with U.S. support. It has once again been accused of human rights violations. In May 13, 2010, the U.S. Congress passed the "Lord's Resistance Army Disarmament and Northern Uganda Recovery Act" to fund efforts to apprehend Kony. One hundred U.S. advisors have been sent to support the Ugandan army. Most recently, the African Union announced the deployment of 5,000 troops in the region. But Kony's LRA has continued to escape capture, and civilians continue to pay the price. Kony remains wanted by the ICC.

In Uganda itself, the population has enjoyed peace, or at least the absence of violence for the first time in decades. People are rebuilding homes and planting their fields. However, the northern region remains economically marginalized. The situation has only been exacerbated by the Museveni government's interest in "developing" the region by transferring land ownership to foreign interests and political allies. Poverty and other problems related to the long-term impact of war, government neglect, and social upheaval continue to make life difficult for many northerners, as documented in a 2010 report of survey findings in four northern communities (www.peacebuildingdata.org/uganda).

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4. Analyzing the appeal of the video

- This is an emotional video. Name the different emotions that the video seeks to elicit. How does it elicit them?
- What role does Jason Russell, the head of Invisible Children, play?
 - What are the benefits of having a white American man tell the story? What are the drawbacks?
- What role does the son of the head of Invisible Children play?
 - What are the benefits of him playing this role? What are the drawbacks?

B. Guidelines for Teaching about an African crisis

Teaching about Africa can be a challenge, as the continent is large, diverse, and changing. In the United States, Africa is subject to many misconceptions that distort realities and perpetuate prejudiced views. Listed below are three widespread stereotypes that the video may reinforce. Following this is a discussion of using critical inquiry to understand Joseph Kony and Uganda.

For people who saw the video with little or no contextual knowledge of recent African history, and particularly of the Great Lakes region of east and central Africa, the video may have reinforced—or even created—stereotypes about Africa.

1. Stereotypes of Africa

a. Violent crises are part of the “African condition.”

There is a popular conception that violent crises are endemic to Africa—almost genetically part of the *African condition*. There is, of course overwhelming evidence that challenges this perception.

b. *Africa is all the same.* Africa is often seen as homogenous, and a place of the exotic, primordial loyalties (*tribalism*), poverty, underdevelopment, and corrupt and ineffective governments, as well as a tendency towards violence. [A valuable resource on this topic is “The Danger of a Single Story,” an 18.5-minute video TED talk by Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Adichie (<http://bit.ly/J5QQWI>).]

c. *Africa and Africans have little capacity to solve problems, particularly resolving conflicts.* In fact, there are recent cases of creative African initiatives from across the continent to deal with violence and its aftermath:

- The women’s peace campaign in Liberia (West Africa) in 2003, which brought together women of all religions and economic classes in a protest movement that led to a negotiated settlement of the bru-

tal civil war. [*Pray the Devil Back to Hell* (available in both 60- and 72-minute versions) tells this story (www.praythedevilbacktohell.com). Some graphic violence is shown.]

- The *gacaca* village courts in Rwanda were established in 2001 as a local response to the need to “bring to justice” thousands of Rwandans who took part in the 1994 genocide. The *gacaca* courts, loosely adapting a traditional Rwandan dispute resolution mechanism, aimed to establish a mechanism of *restorative justice*, with a concern for restoring community relations between perpetrators and victim, while holding perpetrators accountable for their crimes. While the success of *gacaca* at providing restorative rather than retributive justice is debated, the courts were clearly a creative local initiative. [*Co-exist* is one good film about the aftermath of the genocide in Rwanda with a teacher’s guide (www.peacedocumentary.org/).]
- The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), while not fully successful in realizing the goal of national reconciliation, was highly regarded by most South Africans. The TRC model has been adopted by other nations in Africa, Latin America, and Asia for establishing post-conflict restorative justice. [Two films tell the story of the TRC, both of which have user’s guides: *A Long Night’s Journey Into Day* (<http://newsreel.org/video/LONG-NIGHTS-JOURNEY-INTO-DAY>) and *Facing the Truth with Bill Moyers* (www.facinghistory.org/resources/publications/facing-truth).]

2. The Core Approach: Using Critical Inquiry to Teach about Africa

As Africanist educators, we have long embraced pedagogical methodology of critical inquiry, believing that it can ameliorate people’s understanding of Africa and reduce unfounded stereotypes. These approaches are grounded in state and national standards and benchmarks for social studies.

- a. *Providing historical context:* The *Kony 2012* video vividly depicts the atrocities that Joseph Kony and the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) committed over two decades. While these atrocities certainly took place and should be condemned, the video does not provide, nor does it suggest that it would be appropriate to explore, the historical context that gave rise to the LRA. [The 2006 film *Uganda Rising* provides both historical and global context for this conflict. (www.ugandarisingmovie.com/home.html)] Some graphic violence is shown.

- b. *Encouraging students to “complicate” their analysis:* As educators, we encourage our students to “complicate” their analysis of important, complex issues. This is certainly needed when trying to understand the issues related to the atrocities committed by the LRA and the failure of central African governments to arrest Kony.
- c. *Encouraging students to differentiate between cause and effect:* When discussing the issues raised in *Kony 2012*, it is important to explore the history of the conditions under which the LRA arose, how it was moved out of northern Uganda, the several efforts to negotiate with the LRA, and why it continues to exist, though in much reduced numbers, in neighboring countries.
- d. *The Importance of a timely and appropriate response:* The *Kony 2012* video requests immediate actions from its viewers, with the goal of capturing Joseph Kony by the end of 2012. Clearly, there are times of crisis, such as natural disasters or genocide, when immediate humanitarian action is essential. However, there are other conditions when some people call for military action and others call for a more deliberative process, out of concern for possible unintended consequences that may worsen the crises. We should critically engage in a discussion of the type(s) of intervention that are most appropriate regarding the LRA and are most likely to produce the desired results while minimizing negative consequences.
- e. *Listening to Ugandan and African perspectives:* The voices and perspectives of Ugandans and others in Central Africa who have been affected by the LRA are conspicuously absent from the *Kony 2012* video. Their absence may reinforce the negative and erroneous stereotype of Africans as lacking agency, of not having the will or capacity to act in their own interest. Fortunately, the enormous reach of *Kony 2012* has led to lively debate in the United States and many statements by Ugandan journalists, civil society leaders, and scholars that are accessible on the Web.
- f. *Supporting open-ended evaluations of social justice organizations:* The *Kony 2012* video provides an opportunity for educators and students to reflect upon how to research and select civic organizations with which to be civically engaged as local, national, and global citizens. When you are looking to support a civic or social justice organization, what are your criteria for supporting them? What criteria might make you want to know more? What would you be made uneasy by? How would you learn more?

RESOURCES

Uganda Speaks—<http://ugandaspeaks.com>, especially **My Response to KONY 2012** by Rosebell Kagumire, 6:21-minute video <http://bit.ly/J2nSKY> (transcript: <http://bit.ly/GQXHud>) [MS]*

A Letter from Uganda on #Kony2012—A summary of recent Ugandan history by Sara Weschler of Information for Youth Empowerment Programme in Northern Uganda. <http://bit.ly/GSK9w6> [MS]

Selling Old Newspapers Shouldn’t Be Profitable: Invisible Children and Kony 2012—David Sangokoya, a Nigerian-American, creatively discusses stereotypes of Africa. <http://bit.ly/GUPJYu> [MS]

“I’d Tell Anyone”—Food for thought about “helping Africans” by Juliane Okot Bitek, Ugandan poet and author. <http://bit.ly/HBtCcE>

Obama Takes on the LRA: Why Washington Sent Troops to Central Africa by Mareike Schomerus, Tim Allen, and Koen Vlassenroot <http://fam.ag/HELi7R>

Beyond Kony 2012 by Nicolas Tillon of Conciliation Resources (a peacebuilding organisation working with people affected by violent conflict) and Ernest Sugule Kangoyangala. They discuss two questions: Will the military effort to capture Kony lead to a wider war? and What should we do? <http://bit.ly/HLyyAv> [MS]

Central Africa: There’s a Light in the Get Kony Campaign—Jay Naidoo, a South African social justice activist, argues that the horrors of the LRA—and the global system that lets it continue—cannot be ignored. <http://bit.ly/HMpECh>

Unpacking Kony by Ethan Zuckerman, director of MIT’s Center for Civic Media and co-founder of Global Voices, discusses the simplicity of the Kony 2012 message—and its dangers. <http://bit.ly/GUiuWH>

Resources about Uganda, the LRA, and Central Africa by Association of Concerned Africa Scholars <http://bit.ly/IWONKO>

*Note: [MS] identifies items that work well for middle school on up. Other sources are either for high school students or teachers.

For learning more about the LRA

Survey of Northern Ugandans Expressing Their Desires for Social Justice www.peacebuildingdata.org/uganda

The Lord’s Resistance Army by Ledio Cakaj www.enoughproject.org/files/lra_today.pdf

What Will It Take to End the LRA Conflict? by Conciliation Resources <http://bit.ly/HcK3z2>

Many of the millions of people who have watched *Kony 2012* have been touched by the Ugandan children it portrayed and by its focus on the need for an end to the violence involving Joseph Kony's Lord's Resistance Army. The film has, however, been criticized by Ugandans who see its call for an expanded military effort to capture Kony as likely to result in undesirable foreign military intervention, and also by Africa experts who fear that it will contribute to stereotypes. We believe that the suggestions we have made in this article will help teachers to take advantage of the "teaching moment" created by the video, and to engage and address the issues that it raises. 🌐

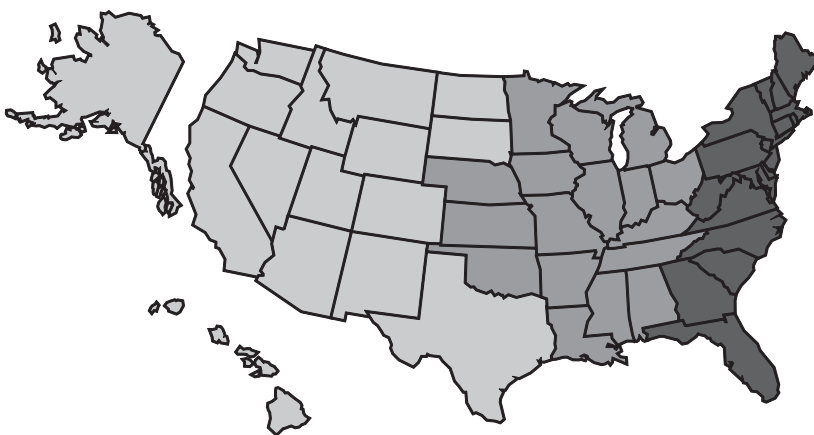
This article was written on behalf of the African Studies Association Outreach Council. The Council has 15 university members, plus a few affiliated organizations, working to strengthen K-16 teaching of Africa. Universities are listed at www.africa.upenn.edu/outreachcouncil. Council members host websites on K-16 teaching, lead professional development programs and advise school districts in selecting the best classroom materials. The Council sponsors the Children's Africana Book Award, an annual award for the best books published on Africa in the preceding year (www.africaaccessreview.org/aar/awards.html)

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