Film Guide

The Lord’s Resistance Army

June 2013
Abstract

This film guide provides material on the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA), a religiously motivated militia from northern Uganda led by indicted war criminal Joseph Kony. Two BBC interviews—one with Kony, another with an official of the Ugandan government who tried to negotiate with Kony—provide insight into the nature of the militant group, its leader, and its brutal, decades-long conflict with the Ugandan government. This guide includes links to video and audio of the interviews, transcripts of the interviews, information on the historical context of the conflict, a list of key terms, discussion questions, and recommended further readings. The film guide is appropriate for use with the Berkley Center’s Religion and Conflict Case Study “Uganda: Religiously-Inspired Insurgency.”

About this Film Guide

This film guide was crafted under the editorial direction of Eric Patterson, visiting assistant professor in the Department of Government and associate director of the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs at Georgetown University.

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Citation

2006 BBC Interview with Joseph Kony (JK), by Sam Farmar (SF)

LINK TO THE INTERVIEW: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KdBcypx1DfE

TRANSCRIPTS FROM THE INTERVIEW

(Starting at 1:08 in the interview)
SF: Is Joseph Kony a god? Is he a god?
LRA soldier: Not god. Not god. But he has a spirit.
SF: How many spirits does he have?
Soldier: Three.
SF: Three spirits?
Soldier: Yes.
SF: He’s like a prophet? He can see things before they happen?
Soldier: Yes, yes, yes, yes.
SF: It’s impossible to kill Joseph Kony?
Soldier: Yes. Yeah.
SF: Even if I shot him here—right in the chest, would he die?
Soldier: No. No, no, no, no.
SF: He cannot die.

(Starting at 8:12 in the interview)
JK: You are the first journalist to come to me in the bush like this. You have now seen me. I am a human being like you. I am also… I have eyes. I have a brain. I wear clothes also.
SF: Describe yourself to me. Tell me who you are.
JK: I am a military person who is fighting in Uganda. I’m a freedom fighter who is fighting for freedom in Uganda. But I’m not a terrorist.

-Break to describe mutilations-
JK: You have been accused of terrible crimes. You know, people having their ears cut off, people having their lips cut out.
SF: Have you been accused of terrible crimes? You know, people having their ears cut off, people having their lips cut out.
JK: That one is not true. That is propaganda which Museveni made.
SF: I’ve seen the photos with people with no noses.
JK: Yes, yes, that is propaganda that Museveni made. Let me tell you clear—that thing was happening in Uganda. Museveni went into the village and he cut the ear off the people telling to the people that that thing was done by the LRA. This is not true. I cannot cut the ear of my brother. I cannot kill the eye of my brother. I cannot kill my brother. That is not true.
SF: Are you saying the LRA has never been involved—never been involved—in any abductions, any mutilations, any rapes?
JK: Yes –
SF: They have never been involved?
JK: LRA has never been involved in that part.

-Break to describe child abductions-
JK: I did not abduct anybody there. Some civilians volunteer themselves to come and join me so that we stay together to protect their life. To defend themselves here. Do you think that children can afford that condition of war? They will not. That is propaganda which Museveni is playing. I don’t have any children here.
SF: But that is not the line he later takes with his troops.
JK Off-Interview: If I were president, all children would carry a gun. To me, fighting is as normal as ironing a shirt.
SF: It is still unclear what, exactly, are your objectives. What are your aims, what are you really fighting for?
JK: We want the people of Uganda to be free. We want the people of Uganda—let me say this, we are fighting for democracy. We want people to be a total democracy—free. We should be free to select, to elect our leader. We want our leader to be elected, elected leader. But not a movement like the one of Museveni.

-Break to discuss ICC charges-
JK: I am not guilty. I am not guilty. At this time, it is very difficult to do but when we talk this peace talk and that peace talk, when we talk and everything is finished well, we go. We go and talk. We go and judge that case to show that I am not found guilty. Yes.
Lt. Gen. Vincent Otti: See?
[Displaying a hand-drawn sketch of the emblem of the LRA]
That’s the emblem of the Lord’s Resistance Army. In the middle of the heart is the Ten Commandments of God. We are fighting to defend the Ten Commandments of God because people are not following the Ten Commandments of God.
SF Off-interview: Kony is accused of controlling his forces with a mixture of distorted Christianity and brutality. Their ideology, they say, comes from the Bible.
SF: Has God told you to fight this war?
JK: No, no, no, no, no, no. It’s not like that. God did not tell me to fight this war, no.
SF: How many spirits speak to you?
JK: Very many. I don’t know the number. But they speak to me, they talk to me. You know, we are guerrilla. We are rebels. We don’t have medicine. But with the help of spirits they will tell us, “You, Mr. Joseph, go and take this thing and that thing [for herbal medicine].”
Betty Bigombe is a Ugandan politician, most recently holding the post of member of Parliament and state minister for water resources in the presidentially appointed cabinet of Uganda. As state minister for northern Uganda from the late 1980s through the mid-1990s, Bigombe sought to negotiate an end to the conflict with the Lord’s Resistance Army by meeting with its elusive leader Joseph Kony in 1993 and initiating a series of highly praised peace talks before Kony ended the talks the following year. She again met with Kony in 2004.

(audio only; scroll to bottom of page)

TRANSCRIPTS FROM THE INTERVIEW

BB: Well, that is a question I still ask myself today—especially after the peace talks in Juba, South Sudan where Kony lost a huge opportunity that could have ended everything and he probably would be living in some relative comfort somewhere. That he let it go… it’s been very difficult to put a finger on exactly what Joseph Kony wants. But all these years Joseph Kony’s always said he wanted to rule Uganda by the Ten Commandments.

RL: Do you believe that?
BB: No, I don’t believe that. If you want to rule by the Ten Commandments then why commit all the atrocities? It’s ridiculous.

RL: The group has been accused, over the many years, of the most appalling acts in many different places on many different occasions. The people who commit those acts, the fighters, why do they do what they do?
BB: Well, there are a number of reasons I would say. Because I have talked for hours and hours with former child soldiers that [sic] were a part of LRA and they talked of the transformation. In other words, you lose your innocence and time comes when you’re no longer ordered to kill. But you kill on your own because brutality earns you recognition, it earns you more food, whatever items that have been looted and eventually you’re awarded with wives or the girl slaves that they take. So, they become extremely brutal because all they want is to be a senior commander somewhere.

RL: The LRA have been active for many, many years and there are critics who say that if particularly the Ugandan government had really wanted to, it could have stopped the LRA long before now. Why do you think it hasn’t been stopped?
BB: You know, spectators are always the best players. Guerrilla warfare is not exactly easy to deal with because you respond to a situation. You’re not quite on top of the game. In the case of the LRA, they’ve been operating in a vast area, which is very sparsely populated both in southern Sudan and now in the DRC area. Places where infrastructure does not really exist: that’s where they operate. So, when there is a lot of pressure on them, they split up in very small groups and it is consequently very difficult.

RL: But if Joseph Kony had been arrested or stopped in some other way before now, would this whole dreadful insurgency have stopped as well?
BB: I believe so. Especially after the peace talks—the Juba peace talks. That if Joseph Kony was arrested or killed, I am convinced that that would probably mark the end of LRA. Having said that, I also need to point out that you have the hardcore LRAs who, for example, have been indicted by the International Criminal Court; I don’t think they would ever give up and come out. The only thing is, it would probably be more difficult for them to keep their followers, it would be more difficult for them to mobilize people to join their rank and file. So, I pretty much believe that the arrest of Kony or killing him would mark the end of LRA.
I
n 1986, a young Acholi woman in northern Uganda, Alice Lakwena, claimed divine inspiration to create a rebel group called the Holy Spirit Mobile Forces. Its target was Yoweri Museveni’s government; he was a southerner leading the National Resistance Army who recently overthrew then-president Milton Obote. Once in power, Museveni is alleged to have systematically weeded out “enemies” and remnant insurgent groups along ethnic lines, including the Acholi. At the same time, Joseph Kony, an alleged cousin of Lakwena, served as a Catholic preacher to a parallel rebel group called the Uganda People’s Democratic Army (UDPA). Lakwena believed that the Acholi were meant to claim the capital, Kampala, but the siege she organized failed and she fled to Kenya. In 1988, UDPA leaders and the Ugandan government signed the Gulu Peace Accord, which allowed for integration of some of the rebels into the government’s army. Kony refused to sign the agreement and recruited Lakwena’s remaining followers, forming the Uganda People’s Democratic Christian Army to continue fighting the government.

In 1991, Kony renamed his army the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA). Kony has consistently asserted a spiritual basis for his power and his objectives. He claims to be possessed by spirits, who guide some of his decisions. When asked what he is fighting for, Kony responds, “…we are fighting for Ten Commandments. Is it bad? It is not against human rights. And that commandment was not given by Joseph (Kony). It was not given by the LRA. No, that commandment was given by God.” Kony went on to explain that the LRA is “fighting for Uganda to be a free state governed by the Ten Commandments, a democratic state, and a state with a freely elected president.”

Kony has also said his mission is to fight the government to protect the rights of the northern Ugandan minorities such as the Acholi. However, Kony and the LRA have terrorized northern Uganda for nearly two decades, murdering and mutilating civilians and pillaging their homes. The LRA habitually kidnapped women and girls, turning them into “bush wives” and sex slaves; young boys were systematically rounded up for forced conscription while men whose lives were spared were forced to be porters and laborers. Since the 1990s, nearly 38,000 children and 37,000 adults have been abducted. More than 500,000 thousand people have been displaced in Uganda’s Gulu and Kitgum districts.

In 1996, three years after the LRA began its insurgency, Ugandan government troops preemptively relocated over two million people into “protected villages.” This move, described as a way to protect civilians from looting, torture, and abduction, actually sparked a humanitarian crisis as the poor conditions in the villages became increasingly squalid. In short, many average citizens in northern Uganda have grievances against both the government and the LRA.

Kony found support for his organization outside of Uganda. In 1993, the Sudanese government overtly assisted the LRA in return for the LRA’s support against the Southern Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA). This alliance was shaken in 2002, however, when the Ugandan and Sudanese governments worked together on “Operation Iron Fist.” The cross-border operation’s mission was to definitively defeat the LRA in their strongholds. Khartoum switched allegiance because the ruling National Congress Party wished to demonstrate to the world that it was an engaged member of the international community. Khartoum’s cooperation was contingent on the express condition that Ugandan troop movements would have to stay to the south of the Juba-Torit highway. The mission failed, however, when LRA members simply retreated behind that “red line” prompting suspicions that someone in the Sudanese government tipped them off. The LRA retaliated with savage attacks on both southern Sudanese and northern Ugandans.

In February 2004, the LRA attacked an Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camp and killed over 200 civilians. LRA rebel Okot Odhiambo let this attack in Lira District, where at least 300 people were burned, shot and attacked with machetes. This had a ripple effect; people took to the streets to protest the government’s inability to protect its people and to demonstrate their frustration toward the Acholi, who other ethnic groups blamed collectively for the LRA insurgency. Three months later, the charity Christian Aid condemned the government in a report citing its lack of will in protecting the people of northern Uganda. The government called the report completely unfair. That very month, the LRA carried
out another brutal attack on an IDP camp. Odhiambo led this attack as well. The rebels had a three-prong approach—one group attacked the camp, the second attacked the government troops ostensibly guarding the camp, while the third focused on patrol units. The grass huts were set on fire and the fleeing people were attacked, abducted or murdered. For his efforts, Kony promoted Odhiambo to Army Commander. These attacks did lead to the government and the LRA holding talks, but no peace agreement came to fruition.

In 2005, the International Criminal Court (ICC) issued warrants for Kony and four of his top commanders, including Odhiambo. The LRA fled their hideouts in southern Sudan to northeastern Congo. The following year, peace talks commenced between the Ugandan government, headed by Museveni, who retained power through Uganda’s first multiparty elections, and the LRA. These talks were mediated by the government of southern Sudan and were held in Juba, Sudan. The LRA delegation did not include Kony as he did not want to risk being arrested for his ICC warrant. The rebels continued to paint themselves as defenders of the Acholi though their savage attacks had alienated them from the Ugandan people. The Ugandan government was not responsive to the LRA’s demand of putting the Ugandan military under foreign control and instituting a quota for Acholi in government positions. Both parties soon violated preconditions for the negotiation—LRA troops deployed from their designated areas and the Ugandan government forces moved to unauthorized locations in northern Uganda. The talks themselves were also at an impasse as the LRA demanded the ICC warrants be dropped before signing a peace deal while the government of Uganda argued for a signed peace agreement being in place before discussion of dropping charges could begin.

Later efforts for initiating peace talks failed as Kony continued to refuse to appear unless the ICC warrants were voided. In fact, the LRA ramped up its attacks while still based in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). A joint military operation between Uganda and the DRC, called Operation Lightning Thunder, effectively destroyed the LRA’s primary DRC base in December 2008. The unintended result was that the LRA merely shifted to the Central African Republic, underscoring how the insurgency has become a regional crisis. A year later, the LRA committed an attack on a DRC village similar to its 2004 sieges. Rebels went on a four-day rampage killing over 300 people with machetes, axes and wooden sticks. Another 250 civilians were abducted, over a quarter being children. The LRA remains a threat—much more to civilians than any of the four governments of the countries they have terrorized—with its leadership at large and its goals unclear.

Key Terms

Identify and discuss the following:

Bantu
Baganda
Banyankole/Nyankole
Acholi
Nilotic
President Yoweri Museveni
Joseph Kony
Okot Odhiambo
Dominic Ongwen
Betty Bigombe
Holy Spirit Mobile Forces
Uganda People’s Democratic Army/ Lord’s Resistance Army
National Resistance Movement
Gulu Peace Accords
Sudan People’s Liberation Army
Operation Iron Fist
Operation Lightning Thunder
Discussion Questions

1. Kony’s soldiers have a certain perception of him that actually differs from how Kony describes himself. What is one to make of these conflicting views on the man?

2. Kony claims the LRA is comprised of freedom fighters for Uganda. Other times he claims to be defending the Acholi people specifically or attempting to set up a Christian state founded on the Ten Commandments. What do you think of his objectives? Why do you think his objectives shift from time to time?

3. Kony purports to be leading a Christian crusade against Yoweri Museveni. President Museveni is a well-known born-again Christian. Discuss what the actual grievances may or may not be in this complex scenario.

4. Brainstorm different approaches for convincing the LRA to stop its brutal tactics and use conventional military tactics or non-violent tactics instead. Explain whether or not you would religious reasoning to convince the group and why.

5. Imagine another peace talk is on the horizon between the Ugandan government and the LRA. You are working with Betty Bigombe to cement the approach the government should take and what concessions it should be prepared to give and when it should give them. Make the argument—in terms of morality as well as practical considerations—that the government ought to reach out to and negotiate with the LRA. Explain what concessions, if any, should be offered by the government to the LRA, and why these concessions are justified given the realities of the situation.
FURTHER READINGS


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1 http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/article680339.ece