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Cover Page Footnote

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An Examination of the Institutionally Oppressive White Savior Complex in Uganda Through Western Documentaries

The white savior complex is an institutional social relation that entails self-serving, condescending, and often institutionalized actions by “privileged” people that aim to provide help to the underprivileged, including those from less powerful nations and people of color in developing nations. The psychological and institutional complex applies to a wide range of domains, spanning from media representation, education, foreign policies, volunteer tourism, to the study abroad, and it justifies the “saving” actions through the good intention to change the status quo of those who are being helped.

At an individual level, the white savior complex is a mentality that encourages individuals to act as saviors of those incapable of self-autonomy. However, the white savior complex is more than the intuitive psychological complex that people often endorse. When understanding individual mentalities and actions in the bigger picture, the white savior complex refers to an institutional social relation made up of individual psychological mentalities. In this broader sense, the phrase endorses the definition of the concept as a confluence of practices, processes, and institutions that reify historical inequities to ultimately validate white privilege.¹ The individual psychological experiences make up the larger complex system that involves many institutions, leading to dire consequences, including inequality and a limitation of those who are being helped. Therefore, the white savior complex is both a psychological and institutional complex.

In a discussion of the white savior complex as an institutional social relation, it is important to identify the three key elements of the complex: the white savior, a condescending “saving” action, and nonwhite people who are being “saved.” These three elements make clear

the “social” part of the definition of the white savior complex as an “institutional social relation”—and under the social relation, the two social groups (the saviors and the saved) are connected through “saving” actions.

The white saviors are the subjects of the white savior complex who intend to better the situations in a developing country or a less privileged population, which they identify as in need of saving. However, “whiteness” is not an accusation of all white people who offer help to nonwhites, and nonwhites from developed nations can also partake in the white savior complex. The use of “white” in the naming and discussion of the white savior complex alludes to white privilege, an important aspect of the white savior complex.

The second key component that defines the white savior complex is the verb: the actions of the savior to “save”—something patronizing and condescending in nature. The condescending attitude demonstrates the feeling of superiority as saviors instead of humble help-providers, which also alludes to the third condition of oppression. The condescending attitude is a key makeup of the white savior mentality because it helps explain the privileges and oppression. Without the condescending mindset that accompanies the saviors, the actions cannot be labeled as consequences of the white savior complex.

The third key element of the white savior complex is the object of the savior action: nonwhite people from developing nations and people of color in developed nations who are characterized by negative stereotypes—including their inability to self-help.

The white savior complex can be understood as an institutional relation because it entails the existence of actual institutions and a widespread system. “Institutional” can be defined in two ways: the existence of actual institutions (like media, government, colleges, or individuals), both private and public, that maintain and reproduce an unbalanced system of social relations, and the

metaphorical meaning of “institutional,” which refers to the nonaccidental, systematic, and widely distributed scope of the white savior complex. The institutional white savior complex is not a product of random people acting on their own but is a result of actual institutions and a larger system that produces and reinforces the same system of inequality.

The broader white savior complex becomes an institutional system capable of inflicting material and psychological harm as various actual institutions support the complex. From popular media, higher education institutions, to foreign aid organizations, physical institutions produce and reinforce the white savior complex. For example, misrepresentations of Africa presented by mass media institutions in the Global North push forward white savior agendas of charities and even non-profit organizations that eventually cause harm to the local population.² The oppression is institutionally structured because of the prevalence of the complex across different domains: scholars from fields as diverse as religion, environmental conservation, education, and politics have all identified that the white savior complex causes damage to its victims.³

This paper uses Ann Cudd’s framework of oppression and applies it to the white savior complex under the four conditions of oppression: the harm, social group, privilege, and coercion condition. Using examples from five Western documentaries about Uganda, the paper demonstrates that the white savior complex causes harm that comes out of an institutional practice; it is perpetrated through a social institution or practice on a social group; there is another privileged social group that benefits from the institutional practice, and there is unjustified coercion or force that brings about the harm.⁴

The paper then examines the cyclical effects—the durability of the oppressive white savior complex in the interaction between Western nations and Uganda, and it discusses the role

of reliance, the reinforcement of stereotypes, and the silence and denial of privilege and in maintaining the oppressive system.

Finally, this paper offers ways to address the problems of the oppressive white savior complex in Uganda to counter what makes oppression possible. It also comments on the roles that documentary journalism plays in the process of both disseminating and combating the white savior complex in cross-national interventionist processes between the United States and Uganda. From the understanding of complexities of social problems to encouraging self-determination and independence, the paper proposes ways to challenge the power hierarchy created by the white savior complex.

Background Information: Documentaries on Uganda

The five Western documentaries on Uganda discussed in this paper include “Kony 2012” (2012), “Call Me Kuchu” (2012), “God Loves Uganda” (2013), “Uganda’s Moonshine Epidemic” (2012), and “Inside Uganda’s Unregulated And Overcrowded Child Orphanage Industry” (2019).

Directed by Jason Russell, “Kony 2012” was produced by Invisible Children in 2012. The forty-minute documentary primarily featured three protagonists: Jacob Acaye, a Ugandan child soldier, and the white director and his son. The documentary’s goal was to expose the crimes done by Joseph Kony, who began a guerilla war in northern Uganda against the Museveni administration in 1986, which led to growing conflicts in the Acholi region between Uganda and Sudan.⁵ Whether as a partial cause, continuation, or response to US support of Museveni, the documentary denounced Joseph Kony and LRA and called for increased US interventions. This paper argues that the documentary manifested the oppressive white savior complex when put under the four conditions of oppression.

The second film is “Call Me Kuchu,” another American documentary film about Uganda produced in 2012. “Call Me Kuchu” was directed by Malika Zouhaliworrall and Katherine Wring and focused on telling the story of the aftermath of the murder of David Kato, an important Uganda LGBT activist. The paper directly compares “Call Me Kuchu” with “Kony 2012”—two documentaries filmed around the same time and same place—and argues that “Call Me Kuchu” did not fall under the white savior trope.

Like “Call Me Kuchu,” “God Loves Uganda” was filmed as a reaction to Uganda’s increasing punishment of homosexuals in the 2010s and was produced by American director Roger Williams. Under a similar background but with a different focus from “Call Me Kuchu,” “God Loves Uganda” explored the impact of Western Christian missionaries on Uganda’s homophobic environment, attributing the passing of the Uganda Anti-Homosexuality Act to American influence. As a film that explored the activities of American missionaries in Uganda, the documentary implicitly supported the white savior complex, and this paper discusses the documentary both in terms of its explicit content and hidden messages and ideas.

Finally, “Uganda’s Moonshine Epidemic” and “Inside Uganda’s Unregulated And Overcrowded Child Orphanage Industry” were both produced by Vice, in 2012 and 2019 respectively. The former investigated Uganda’s waragi (Uganda’s domestic beverages) and alcoholism culture while the latter exposed problems with Uganda’s child orphanage industry in the ten-minute short film. Although with the same producer, the two documentaries discussed very different topics and had a diverging relationship with the white savior complex.

All films discussed except for the one filmed in 2019 were produced shortly after Museveni won his fourth presidential election in 2011, during a time when the United States sent increased forces to help the Museveni administration combat LRA rebels led by Joseph Kony.⁶

During the same time period, the issue of homosexuality tolerance also became an important topic in Uganda and attracted media attention internationally.

To show that Western documentaries oppress Ugandans under the white savior trope, Ann Cudd's definition of oppression, which outlines the four conditions of oppression is quite helpful: "Oppression is an institutionally structured harm perpetrated on groups by other groups using direct and indirect material and psychological forces that violate justice."⁷ In her definition, she highlights the four conditions of oppression: the first condition is that oppression is institutionally structured harm; the second condition is that the harm is perpetrated due to group membership; the third condition, the privilege condition, implies that the oppressors benefit from oppression; and the last condition maintains the unjust coercion or force behind the white savior complex.

The White Savior Complex: An Institutionally Structured Harm

Based on a stark civilized-savage dichotomy, the white savior complex creates a world where the victims of oppression come to suffer material harm such as inequality and limitation as well as psychological harms like dehumanization—the typical consequences of oppression.⁸ Coiner of the term "the white savior complex" Teju Cole ends the "The White Savior Complex" article by noting that "the singer may be innocent; never the song."⁹ Despite the possibly good intentions of the white saviors, their actions are harmful and oppressive because their assistance has become a part of a larger system that causes inequality and dehumanization institutionally.

In Cole's second tweet condemning the white savior complex in 2012, he wrote that the white savior complex "supports brutal policies."¹⁰ The documentaries on Uganda supported and justified brutal policies in Uganda, and the brutal policies oppressed the Ugandan economy and population, aggravating existing problems and causing material losses to the victims of the white

savior complex. Material harms inflicted by the white savior complex range from economic exploitation, human rights abuses, military exploitation, destructive political interference, to the loss of well-being and lives.

“Kony 2012,” documented Invisible Children’s humanitarian campaign by highlighting a Western activist who appropriated the victimhood of a recovering child soldier in northern Uganda to raise awareness about the capture Joseph Kony.¹¹ The agenda advocated by the documentary eventually caused more material harms to Ugandans and people from neighboring nations, and the increased U.S. foreign military presence in northern Uganda contributed to a series of human rights abuse circumstances and more regional instability. The inaccurate and oversimplified solution that “Kony 2012” offered eventually led to government oppression, military resource exploitation, and human rights abuses in Uganda—all convicted by the Museveni government that the documentary and the United States supported.¹²

The award-winning documentary “God Loves Uganda” displayed a similar pattern: despite its good intentions to condemn extreme evangelical church members from the United States who imposed homophobic “moral codes” of sexual conduct in Uganda. The documentary fell into the slippery slope of supporting the Museveni government by positively portraying the Ugandan government to better position the blame on missionaries. Ironically, although “God Loves Uganda” placed its blames on conservative American Christian missionaries who forced homophobia onto Uganda, the documentary itself also indirectly caused material harms to Ugandans because of its simplified solutions to Uganda’s homophobia crisis.¹³

Ugandans and Western groups have argued that because of the direct support from the United States, Museveni was able to commit more human rights abuses, exploit the rules of the International Monetary Fund by increasing military spending, and conduct illegal actions that

harmed Uganda as well as its neighboring countries.¹⁴ The original problem caused by Joseph Kony was left unsolved, and the interventions led to more problems and instances of material harm—direct consequences of the advocacy of the documentary. The white savior complex behind “Kony 2012” and “God Loves Uganda” encouraged actions that caused more harm than good, immeasurably damaging the northern Ugandan civilian populations and the overall stability of northern Uganda.¹⁵

The military-based solution encouraged by the “Kony 2012” campaign led to the ongoing existence of LRA and other militant groups in northern Uganda, and violence continued; unable to offer a regional political solution, the United States neither removed Joseph Kony from the battlefield nor cured the conditions that have allowed him to thrive in northern Uganda.¹⁶ The framing, structure, and goals of the “Kony 2012” campaign used the case of one single helpless passive victim to support the capture of Joseph Kony. Like “God Loves Uganda,” the testimony and narrative denied the complexity in identifying and solving problems that arise from complicated humanitarian crises, and the limited objectives of the campaign distracted white saviors from understanding the potential political grievances and nuances.¹⁷

While “Kony 2012” and “God Loves Uganda” exemplified characteristics of the white savior complex, other documentaries successfully disclosed the material harms of the complex in their storytelling. The Vice News documentary “Inside Uganda’s Unregulated and Overcrowded Child Orphanage Industry” and related news reporting revealed the material harms of a major white savior activity in Uganda: the orphanage industry. The documentary directly pointed out that many kindhearted volunteers from the West donated money to unregulated and unlicensed orphanage organizations in Uganda, ultimately contributing to an oppressive industry that took away the well-being and even lives of innocent Ugandan children. From 1990 to 2020, the

number of children living in Ugandan orphanages surged from 1,000 to 55,000.¹⁸ The documentaries revealed that instead of protecting and helping the children, the volunteers were using their money to fuel an oppressive industry where children lived in poor conditions and grew up prone to a higher criminal record and psychological problems.¹⁹ Like the efforts that attempted to “save” northern Ugandans in “Kony 2012,” oversimplified understanding of Uganda’s problems and inappropriate solutions offered often caused material harm to the local population, satisfying the first condition of oppression.

Psychological Harms and the Recognition Theory

When the oppressed become psychologically damaged and believe in their own inferiority, it is easier for the oppressors to cause material harm. The white savior complex strips away the basic self-worth, self-determination, and self-respect of members from the oppressed group because they are denied of their basic ability to save themselves.

According to the recognition theory, individuals desire recognition from others as a form of self-consciousness and self-perception.²⁰ Under the recognition theory, the oppressed lose recognition and develop an inferiority complex from the oppressors and themselves and would slowly accept their claimed inferiority.²¹ The white savior actions imply that the people being saved are incapable of saving themselves, which adds on to the inferiority complex and a lack of self-recognition on the oppressed people’s parts. The condescending attitudes and sympathy reinforce a charitable hierarchy between the privileged white saviors and the oppressed victims of the white savior complex. Instead of promoting friendly horizontal connections based on human equality, the white savior complex perpetuates oppression because of its implications of inequality and a one-sided dominance.²² Slowly, the people who are being “saved” acquiesce to their oppression because they believe in the negative stereotypes that represent their inferiority.²³

Under the white savior complex, documentaries like “Kony 2012” that appealed to people’s patronizing sympathy became paternalistic and elitist on the part of more powerful nations and further supported stereotypes that characterized the help receivers as incompetent.²⁴ The portrayals of Ugandans in documentaries like “Kony 2021,” “God Loves Uganda,” and “Uganda’s Moonshine Epidemic” all convinced not only the saviors but the saved of their alleged inability and inferiority . The white savior trope separates the world into white saviors and the nonwhites, and the patronage further promotes the idea that nonwhite characters and cultures are shattered and pathological.²⁵ In “Kony 2012,” the director murdered the voice of Ugandans themselves and told a simplified story that alluded to the incorrect inferior characteristics of Ugandans. Likewise, Roger Williams, the director of “God Loves Uganda,” depicted Ugandans as gullible and “lacking in agency” in his documentary.²⁶ In “Uganda’s Moonshine Epidemic,” the journalist showed open contempt towards the Ugandan culture, portraying the nation as backward and addicted to alcohol.

Infliction based on group membership

The white savior complex creates institutionally structured harms—material and psychological losses based on group membership. Social groups of victimhood of the white savior complex generally refer to people from the Global South and people of color in developed nations. In the case of this paper, the social group refers to Ugandans. As explained in the definition, the white savior complex is a type of social relation—meaning that it is grounded on the existence of social groups. The second condition of oppression, the social group condition, makes clear that the harm is inflicted through a social institution or practice on a social group whose identity exists apart from the oppressors.²⁷

Stereotypes are generalizations that people make about persons based on traits that they believe the persons possess that are also present in the identifiable group.²⁸ White saviors identify and label stereotypes on members from certain social groups—both voluntary and nonvoluntary ones—that encourage saving actions. When members refuse to identify with the stereotypes but are forced by white saviors to receive “help,” they become nonvoluntary members who are usually unhappy about the way that they are being portrayed and treated. The white savior complex’s implications with stereotypes have a long history. The White Men’s Burden ideology during the colonial era perpetrated harm on “uncivilized” citizens of less powerful countries based on negative stereotypes that the Pacific islanders were “new-taught,” “sullen,” and “half-devil and half-child.”²⁹ Uganda blogger Rosebell Kagumire also pointed out on YouTube that the simplicity of the “good white versus evil black” narrative is reminiscent of the worst excesses of the colonial-era interventions.³⁰ However, not all documentaries endorsed the white savior trope and imposed oppression on a defined social group. “God Loves Uganda” sought to raise awareness of the roles that stereotypes play in the cycle of oppression. The documentary disclosed and denounced radical evangelical white saviors like IHOP leader Lou Engle who perceived Uganda as in need of saving from prevalent sexual immorality.³¹ Through extensive interviews with church members and missionaries from the United States, the documentary identified the negative stereotypes of Americans towards Uganda as the roots of the widespread homophobia and the AIDS epidemic in Uganda, which directly challenged the identification of Ugandans as the social group carrying negative stereotypes. On the other hand, documentaries like “Uganda’s Moonshine Epidemic” and “Kony 2012” made generalizations that characterized all Ugandans under the same category of “in-need-of-saving,” which demonstrated the oppressive features of the products.

The creation, reinforcement, and application of negative stereotypes towards people of color enable oppressions to harm members from a specific social group. Kagumire poignantly condemns the white savior complex for furthering the “unable to help themselves and needing outside help all the time” narrative based on widespread media that portrayed Africans as voiceless and hopeless.³²

The Privilege Condition: The Benefits That the Saviors Receive

In the tweet where Cole denounced the white savior complex for supporting brutal policies in the morning, he then points out that the white saviors “receive awards in the evening.”³³ If the brutal policies refer to the forces that inflict material and psychological harms discussed in the last section, the awards that the white saviors receive correspond with the third condition of oppression—the privilege condition where another social group benefits from the institutionally structured harms.³⁴

In Cole’s fifth tweet, he states that the white savior complex is about having a big emotional experience that validates privilege.³⁵ The “big emotional experience” alludes to the psychological benefits that the white saviors receive: a sense of fulfillment, self-worth, and superiority that validates white privilege. The series of saving actions are self-serving because the white saviors satisfy their sentimental needs through developing and reinforcing their superiority complex, feeling good about themselves after providing help. For example, a nobody from the West can go to Africa and become a godlike savior.³⁶ The confident, comfortable, and even oblivious white saviors act in a place of privilege through self-serving and condescending actions, often wanting to save Ugandans without knowing how. The mentality is perfectly characterized by sentimentalism: emotion-based claims to moral superiority and justification for one’s actions.³⁷ While Ugandans, the receivers of help, develop an inferiority complex and are

psychologically damaged, the providers of help become confident saviors who confirm their self-worth through their series of actions, usually as film producers and activists. The psychological consequences of both the help providers and recipients again reflect the institutional social relation behind the white savior complex: a power dynamic that cyclically benefits the whites and harms the nonwhite victims.

In “God Loves Uganda,” Rev. Kapya Kaoma, a Zambian priest and Ugandan gay-rights researcher, noted “In America, [the Christian missionary] is a nobody. But in Africa, this extremist guy becomes the spokesperson of American evangelicalism and is able to address the entire parliament for five hours.”³⁸ The emotional needs and desires to feel complacent motivated the missionaries who later had a great emotional experience from becoming a famous figure in Uganda.

In “Inside Uganda’s Unregulated and Overcrowded Child Orphanage Industry,” even when informed about the illegality and oppressive nature of many orphanages, one interviewee from the United States who donated money to Ugandan orphanages monthly did not express any regret or concerns but only confirmed her actions as always benefitting the children.³⁹ Her response not only revealed the deeply rooted stereotypes she had for Uganda but also confirmed that her actions were self-serving rather than helpful. Ultimately, she did not care so much about helping the children as to satisfy her emotional needs and reaffirm her privilege.

As Cole describes, the white savior complex is “a valve for releasing the unbearable pressures that build in a system built on pillage.”⁴⁰ The same sentimentalism validates white privilege and supports white superiority by dividing the world into global citizens (whites from powerful countries) and global subjects (people from the Global South), creating an illusion that awareness, enthusiasm, and limited actions are enough for making changes.⁴¹ From interview

clips to narratives, the documentaries about Uganda alone were packed with white saviors who wanted to feel good about themselves, conforming to the third condition of oppression.

Given that the recipients of help find themselves materially damaged by the “saving” actions, it is not surprising that the economic resources become part of the saviors’ possessions. Whether gaining profits from making the “Kony 2012” documentary that went viral or receiving economic rewards for encouraging religious faith and homophobia in Uganda, individuals gain all types of profits from attempting to “save” a different social group.⁴²

Beginning with the motivations behind “saving” actions, the process was largely interest-driven. As early as the process of choosing aid subjects, the oppressors planted their interests in the programs, foreshadowing future self-serving and oppressive aid processes. The Christian missionaries that “God Loves Uganda” condemned, for example, directly expressed that they wanted to receive benefits from the very beginning.

Likewise, the unregulated and often illegal orphanages in Uganda also became a channel of money for many white saviors, as the industry provides the donors and volunteers with material benefits while encouraging them to support oppressive treatments of the children. Together, Uganda’s unregulated orphanages pulled in around a quarter of a billion dollars yearly from donors from European nations, Canada, and the United States—numbers that testified for the material benefits behind “charity.”⁴³ The assistant commissioner for the government ministry Mondo Kyateka, who regulated children’s institutions, indicated that many donors and volunteers took advantage of the corrupt system and used the donated money to make themselves richer.⁴⁴ Supported by an immense amount of donations and funds from less-informed Westerners, the unregulated orphanages in Uganda gained the incentive to put more children into the orphanage for bigger budgets, ultimately treating children like a commodity.⁴⁵ Behind the

connection between Western intervention in Uganda and resource exploitation was the logic that the exact interference—as well as the maintenance of poverty—could ultimately benefit aid organizations and filmmaking agents.⁴⁶ The white saviors' intentions are not as pure as they claim: the self-serving condescending actions often serve as excuses to secure the self-interests of the privileged. During the process, some documentaries were recipients of material benefits, while others helped exposed and criticized the condition of oppression.

Direct or Indirect Coercion or Force

The last condition of oppression refers to the involvement of coercion and force—the very sources of material and psychological harms. The direct and indirect forces often act in ways that further the oppression through externally affecting individual choices or indirectly coercing the victims into making decisions that are oppressive in their own terms.⁴⁷ While direct oppressive forces strip away the choice-making opportunities of the victims, the indirect forces—often reflecting the institutional and widespread nature of the white savior complex—are more nuanced and difficult to identify. The white savior complex satisfies the last condition of oppression because it maintains the system of oppression and reinforces the unjust social relation dynamic through coercive forces like violence and ideological domination.

Although campaigns like “Kony 2012” claimed to save northern Ugandans from Joseph Kony, it was nothing but conscription of sympathy and outrage aiming to advance the increased military action political agenda of the savior country.⁴⁸ It was one symptom of the white savior complex and the military-industrial complex and served as justifications for expanding military presence in central Africa.⁴⁹ The unjust use of violence and militarization encouraged by “Kony 2012” demonstrated the coercive nature of the policies from Western countries that resulted in worsening local conditions.

The loss of innocent lives of local activists, journalists, and civilians in Uganda was not mere accidents but were consequences of institutionally structured coercive forces that inflicted harm. The conflicts were not rightfully sanctioned or justified but was evidence of unjust coercion. With indirect coercion, oppression elevates to a more complex level, encompassing religious, political, cultural, and social aspects besides military and economic oppression. Similar to neocolonialism—when the former colonizer dominates the values, religion, political, or economic system of a less powerful region—the white savior complex imposes ways of legitimizing harms through ideology domination.⁵⁰ Besides the domination of military forces and economic exploitation, the white savior complex acts in ways that prevent the local population from seeking self-determination. After receiving help for the first time, the oppressed find themselves in a quagmire where their choices further their own oppression; they come to acquiesce to future white savior activities in their local areas, becoming the victims of an institutionally coercive system that limits their rational choices. For example, upon seeing local activists or journalists who speak up murdered, the local population is faced with very few choices but to permit the outsider to intervene, which stagnates local initiative efforts.

As the aid programs promote the interests of the home country, they also impose political influences, economic dependency, and product monopoly on the local population, forcing ideological beliefs onto their recipients and furthers their oppression through a coercive process.⁵¹ The imposed political ideologies become invisible forces that make it more difficult for local populations to escape modern-day imperialism. As the ideologically coercive forces shape the social beliefs and desires of the local populations of Ugandans, the oppressed come to reproduce their own oppression, which partly contributes to the cyclical effects of oppression.⁵²

One example of ideological domination in Uganda is the evangelical missionaries' homophobic agenda. The documentary "Call Me Kuchu" denounced the radical Christians from the United States who imposed their oppressive moral codes onto the local populations in Uganda and argued that the ideological domination led to the passing of legislation that would institute the death penalty for "homosexual offenders."⁵³ Many Ugandans, like Ugandan Episcopal Bishop Christopher Senyonjo, believed that the ideas of the American Christians in Uganda led to hatred and fear.⁵⁴ Besides the direct influence of modern-day Christians, it is worth noting that the British colonial origins of anti-homosexuality and imperial impositions from centuries ago also contributed to the complex problems in modern Ugandan culture and society.⁵⁵ In a way, the more recent white savior activities and actions and the earlier imperial ideologies imposed similar religious and ideological constraints on Ugandans and led to their continued sufferings.

The Limitation of Rational Choices

The absence of choices is another common characteristic of indirect coercion. The oppressed further their oppression by making choices that are harmful to themselves. Instead of actively resisting unjust coercive forces, they acquiesce to their oppression and make decisions that often end up inflicting harm to members of their social groups.

Jacob Acaye, the child soldier in the "Kony 2012" campaign who was portrayed as helpless and desperate for help, is a good example of the oppressively coercive effects of the complex. As the only victim with an identity in the documentary, Acaye was represented by the white savior throughout the course of the documentary, being silenced in a way that murdered his original testimony and voice as the real victim.⁵⁶ Instead, Jason Russell, the white narrator and director of the film, told the story of Acaye, stealing Acaye's voice and framing it under a

typical white savior trope. The situation of Acaye represents the dilemma many victims faced: their attempt to tell their stories only led to their continued oppression, and their rational choices were so limited that they unavoidably fell into the white savior trap as the helplessly oppressed persons. The outcomes of Acaye's choice validated the oppressive forces of the white savior complex. Although the documentary aimed to build the story based on shared humanity, it revealed a darker side of the film: the unknowable passive victim was ultimately utilized to attract patronizing sympathy targeted towards Western activists only, leading to the beginning of new rounds of oppression.⁵⁷

Jacob's story is part of a broader pattern that encompasses all the four conditions of oppression. Under the larger background of an institutional system, the indirect coercive forces are more dangerous because they are harder to identify, which creates an inaccurate yet common illusion that seems to justify the "innocent" saviors. In the meantime, the illusion makes it seem like the oppressed are the ones who are accountable for their own sufferings.

Indirect coercion is among the many causes of the durability and cyclical effects of oppression, and in the context of the white savior complex, other contributing factors include self-imposition, the reinforcement of stereotypes, and the silence or denial of privilege. The factors play complex roles in ensuring the prevalence and durability of oppression despite voices that speak against it. They also explain why the oppressive white savior complex lasted for such a long time and continues to harm people today.

Reliance on White Saviors

The imposed political, economic, and cultural ideologies, the set of doctrines that guide specific actions discussed in the previous section, are invisible forces that affect the rational choices of individuals, subtly oppressing the local population by making them reliant on "help"

from interveners. White savior activities often obstruct self-determination efforts, and once the white saviors cease to provide help to the local population, the recipients of help become helpless.

In “Inside Uganda’s Unregulated and Overcrowded Child Orphanage Industry,” Immaculate Nakiyimba, a farmer in Uganda, says, “Because the whites who were sponsoring me stopped sending help from Australia. That chapter closed. This is why I started farming. That’s where my education ended.”⁵⁸ She blamed the founder of the school of the orphanage for leading to her distress because the help providers only kept those who could pay in schools.⁵⁹ The help providers made the recipients of help extremely vulnerable to instability, which provided perfect conditions for more interventionist actions in a vicious cycle.

Similarly, as an indirect result of the “Kony 2012” campaign, at least a million people relied heavily on Western food aid programs.⁶⁰ The more the white saviors provide help, the more reliant on foreign aid the local populations grow, gradually preventing any self-help efforts.

Media is a powerful carrier and reproducer of stereotypes. In a survey that tested college students’ perceptions of Africa and Africans after watching the “Kony 2012” documentary, the results indicated significant influence media portrayal has on the ways United States college students perceive the Africa continent. After watching the documentary, college students perceived the continent as “conflict-ridden” and expressed low confidence in the African continent in general.⁶¹ The redemptive narrative that described Uganda and the Global South as deprived, inferior, and homogeneous in the documentary furthered false stereotypes of Uganda, leading to the “dramatic results of the experiment”: manifesting the negative effects “Kony 2012” has on students’ perceptions of Africa and Africans.⁶² Although the documentary focused on Uganda, the participants of the survey indicated stereotypes towards the Africa continent in

general, which revealed the power of stereotypes towards all Africans. Whether the filmmakers intended to portray Uganda as lacking agency, the outcomes are telling about the effects of the portrayal: the implicit biases and stereotypes that filmmakers had transferred to larger audiences through mediums like white savior films and documentaries that portray the Third World as in need of saving. It is not difficult for the researchers to conclude that the “slick repackaging of entrenched stereotypes” in “Kony 2012” reinforced negative perceptions of Uganda and Africa.⁶³ While media can educate young people about Africa, it can also reinforce destructive stereotypes.⁶⁴ The “Kony 2012” documentary ultimately led to changes in US foreign policies that supported intervention and oppression in northern Uganda.

Similarly, “God Loves Uganda” portrayed Ugandans as “easily led” and lacking agency, and the narrative lacked complexity and ignored the roles that colonial and neocolonial interventions played in the Ugandan society.⁶⁵ In the documentary, the director did not explore the roots of Ugandans’ conditions but implied that poverty and desperation naturally created conditions for Evangelicals’ savior actions, which again reinforced stereotypes.⁶⁶ Although the documentary itself blamed the United States white saviors for inflicting harm and instilling hatred in Uganda, it ironically reinforced oppression through acquiescing to inaccurate stereotypes that depicted Ugandans as nothing but helpless. The patronizing and condescending portrayal of Uganda seemed to generalize the Ugandan religion as backward and inferior—the exact stereotypes that led to the savior actions in the first place.⁶⁷

Vice’s “Uganda’s Moonshine Epidemic” celebrated white privilege in a similar way: it portrayed Ugandans as drunkards in need of saving; the journalist in the documentary displayed condescending curiosity and open cultural contempt towards Ugandans, constantly rolling his

eyes and complaining when waiting for dinner.⁶⁸ The documentary did not foster understanding through its exploration and only reinforced negative stereotypes towards Uganda.

The documentaries reinforced stereotypes and contributed to the durability of oppression, subtly perpetuating the paradigm of the Manifest Destiny and white paternalism.⁶⁹ Fed with documentaries like these, the consumers of such media products would slowly come to believe in the false portrayals of Ugandans and their social dynamic with the rest of the world, believing in and even supporting misleading stereotypes themselves. Media affects people's popular opinions, and institutions like the journalism and film industry create, carry, and distribute inaccurate stereotypes that further the oppression of Ugandans.

The reproduction of stereotypes and false narratives of the relationship dynamic between the West and Ugandans easily transfers from one medium to another, propagating at a rapid speed. For example, the stereotypes in documentaries described above and other transnational communications networks amplified the illusion of the "big emotional experience of the enthusiast" and thus supported more white savior activities.⁷⁰ For example, without being able to critically analyze the white savior complex in documentaries and other forms of media, teachers are prone to perpetuate the same white savior ideology in the classroom.⁷¹ More broadly speaking, media presentations can lead to education, study abroad programs, and government policies to support the white savior complex. In the end, the problems underlie the larger institutional system that perpetuates the white savior complex.

Silence and Denial of Privileges

The silence and denial of privileges reinforce white privileges and thus strengthen the system of oppression. Silence about privilege, often appearing in the form of condescending

sympathy, reinforces privilege as it normalizes the social relation dynamic between powerful white saviors and helpless nonwhites.

In “Kony 2012,” the Westerners’ privilege as whites and members from a developed nation was reinforced as the documentary fixated on the inferiority and helplessness of Acaye as well as the superiority of the West.⁷² Throughout the course of the film, there was no acknowledgment or discussion of privilege, and the documentary promoted the redeemer-and-redeemed dichotomy. Silence about privilege itself is a function of privilege and has a chilling effect: without having to think about the constraints of their actions, the white saviors act in ways that reinforce their privilege and thus the oppression of people of color in developing nations. It becomes clear that both the silence and denial of privilege are part of a larger system of oppression. Privilege confers dominance and gives permission to control, and privilege plays a key role in maintaining the system of domination and oppression.⁷³ Although not a condition of oppression, the durability of oppression is its typical characteristic. The self-maintaining and cyclical effects of oppression sustain the system of oppression and reinforce the psychology of oppression.⁷⁴

Solutions

Although it seems impossible to eradicate the institutional white savior complex, there are things that people can do to challenge the oppressive system. While silence and denial of privilege as well as a superiority complex lead to the reinforcement of oppression, the acknowledgment of privilege, awareness-raising, and humility minimize the psychological harms. While imposed stereotypes and misunderstanding force innocent victims into a place of oppression, respect and the restoration of the dignity of a social group can minimize bias and encourage empathy across different social groups. While oversimplified interventionist solutions

prevent local efforts, the support for self-determination can empower the local populations and prevent oppression from exploiting their confidence. While documentary journalism and media can perpetuate stereotypes, they can also be powerful tools to combat the oppressive system.

To challenge the power hierarchy, the providers of help need to position themselves correctly in the first place—not as saviors but as humble help providers who understand the values of a different culture. In media representation, filmmakers need to incorporate complexity in their storytelling and show cultural respect. Filmmakers have the power to draw their relationship with privilege and create cross-cultural empathy. In “Call Me Kuchu,” the narratives encompassed diversity and complexity and revealed the different oppressions that members of the LGBT community experienced.⁷⁵ Unlike “Kony 2012,” “Call Me Kuchu” is a positive example of how a documentary about Uganda could avoid condescendingly displaying the white savior complex. Moreover, the storyline in “Call Me Kuchu” avoided oversimplifying complex local problems, and unlike “God Loves Uganda,” the documentary did not offer oversimplified solutions of simply stopping Western Evangelical missionaries to end homophobia.⁷⁶ Even though the filmmakers were white, the story did not face the same criticism that “Kony 2012” did because the narrator did not position themselves in a place of power or privilege but humbly presented the voice of the oppressed in Uganda. Like *What is the What*, biographical fiction about Sudan, the narrative of “Call Me Kuchu” attempted to promote international justice without conscripting Western sympathy from a hierarchical system.⁷⁷

In documentaries, when help providers overpower the help recipients and arrogantly believe that they can better the lives of the people in need of saving, they are supporting the white savior complex. Whereas when they decenter themselves from their privilege and treat the recipients of help as equally deserving of respect, dignity, and recognition, the outcomes of their

actions will be different. Documentaries without cultural empathy or ones that ignore the complexity of problems like “Kony 2012,” “Uganda’s Moonshine Epidemic,” and “God Loves Uganda” furthered the white savior complex through stereotypes. In the meantime, documentaries including “Call Me Kuchu” and “Inside Uganda’s Unregulated and Overcrowded Child Orphanage Industry” had the power to raise awareness of fatal problems and condemned white savior activities.

The Importance of Self-Determination

The white savior complex and its reinforcement stagnate the self-determination efforts of nonwhites across the globe. The “we have to save them because they can’t save themselves” narrative is a common justification for interventionist actions. As discussed previously, the prevention of self-determination corresponds with the cyclical effects of oppression as the recipients of help build reliance on the saviors. To combat the white savior complex, it is important to encourage self-help. Local efforts exemplify and encourage self-determination as well as community connections and can boost the confidence of the members from a specific social group. Starting with the cross-national documentaries about Uganda, the filmmakers should preserve the voices of diverse individuals and give them the opportunities to speak for themselves.

In “Call Me Kuchu,” the filmmakers allowed the Ugandans to tell their own stories in front of the camera as individuals with names and identities. Characters with different experiences and stories, including Naome, Stosh, and Longjones, all told their stories in “Call Me Kuchu” and celebrated the diversity and complexity of the story. Unlike “Kony 2012,” a documentary that completely murdered the voices and identities of Ugandans, “Call Me Kuchu” encouraged self-determination in storytelling.

Creating an oversimplified solution without thinking about the outcomes is a common mistake white saviors make, which can result in oppression and the aggravation of local problems. One effective way to solve the problem is for white saviors to respect local populations as agencies capable of self-help. Even when they determine to intervene, basic communication and negotiations with local groups is necessary.

Conclusion

This paper defines the white savior complex as an institutional social relation that involves the white saviors, condescending actions, and the saved. The examples of American documentaries on Uganda alone demonstrate the oppressiveness of the white savior complex—an institutional social relation that inflicts harm based on group membership, benefits the oppressors materially and psychologically and involves the direct and indirect coercion and force that are unjust. From building reliance, reinforcing stereotypes through documentary journalism, to the silence and denial of privilege, complex factors work together to ensure that the system of oppression is so durable and widespread across time frames, geographic locations, and different domains, and it is not surprising that the white savior complex itself is institutional by definition.

There are ways to challenge the system of oppression, including cultural empathy and embracing complexity and encouraging self-determination. Documentaries can both further oppression and combat the white savior complex. Understanding the oppressiveness of the white savior complex as a durable institutional social relation, people need to decolonize their minds and rethink the nature, effects, and outcomes of interventionist actions across various domains in the interaction between Uganda and the Global North. However, it is also important to understand that the white savior complex is not unique to the context of this paper and is present in many other geographic domains.

ENDNOTES

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