Negotiating with ghosts: Cycles of conflict and prospects for peace in Northern Uganda

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The conflict in Northern Uganda is the archetypal non-rational African conflict. The abduction of children and the use of terror tactics on civilians have contributed to the idea that the war is promulgated by barbarians who perpetrate savagery and exist in worlds of chaos outside of ‘normal’ civilisation. Liberal peace approaches to peaceful reconciliation, including ICC arrest warrants are unlikely to lead to complete peace since they undermine alternative approaches to traditional justice and represent a misunderstanding of the nature of the conflict. The extensive use of mysticism, religion and indoctrination by Kony leads to the conclusion that the LRA resembles a violent religious cult and peace can only come if this aspect of Kony’s leadership is taken into account. Whist the use of a cosmology as an anti-development doctrine has hidden more conventional drivers of conflict, it has had a profound impact through extensive indoctrination of abducted children and makes it unlikely that the LRA will succumb to a conventional, liberal peace wherever it is located.

‘The bullets whine on the last afternoon.
The wind is up and full of ashes,
dispersing the day and the formless war, and the victory belongs to them,
to the barbarians...’[1]