The State as Invader: Uganda’s army invading bush and sacred space in Karamoja

Ben Knighton
Oxford Centre for Mission Studies

Taking my Africa article ‘The State as Raider’ a step further following further fieldwork in Karamoja in October 2005, I examine local contestation of the state’s presumption to a monopoly of violence in its periphery. The sedentary state supported by the strategies of ‘strong states’ in the West has been trying to implement its territorial sovereignty in a pastoralist area, where land is used communally for various purposes. The Uganda People’s Defence Force (UPDF) has gone into cattle-camp, homestead corral, and sacred grove assuming it has the right to do so in order to uphold property and security. Indeed pastoralists may from time to time demand protection from the state, but this is a stylized discourse showing the state its own impotence and the necessity for traditional political autonomy. The actual effects of disarmament programmes tend to support the latter view. Operating in mists of misunderstanding that allow declarations of war to be mistaken for the maintenance of law and order, the UPDF puts itself in the rôle of invading space to which, in the view of the Karamojong, it is not entitled. Their response is both military and religious: to defend the property necessary for their livelihoods with armed violence and to pray for the invaders to go back to their own place. This constitutes a repudiation of both the validity and the sovereignty of the state and its security forces.