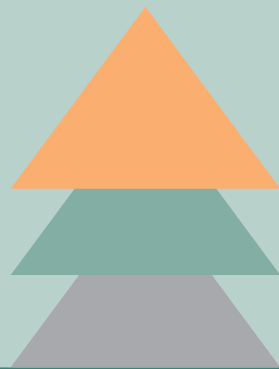# Religions and Development
Research Programme

Politics, Religion and the Lord's Resistance Army in Northern Uganda

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Religions and Development

Research Programme

The Religions and Development Research Programme Consortium is an international research partnership that is exploring the relationships between several major world religions, development in low-income countries and poverty reduction. The programme is comprised of a series of comparative research projects that are addressing the following questions:

- How do religious values and beliefs drive the actions and interactions of individuals and faith-based organisations?
- How do religious values and beliefs and religious organisations influence the relationships between states and societies?
- In what ways do faith communities interact with development actors and what are the outcomes with respect to the achievement of development goals?

The research aims to provide knowledge and tools to enable dialogue between development partners and contribute to the achievement of development goals. We believe that our role as researchers is not to make judgements about the truth or desirability of particular values or beliefs, nor is it to urge a greater or lesser role for religion in achieving development objectives. Instead, our aim is to produce systematic and reliable knowledge and better understanding of the social world.

The research focuses on four countries (India, Pakistan, Nigeria and Tanzania), enabling the research team to study most of the major world religions: Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism and African traditional belief systems. The research projects will compare two or more of the focus countries, regions within the countries, different religious traditions and selected development activities and policies.

The consortium consists of six research partner organisations, each of which is working with other researchers in the four focus countries:

- University of Birmingham, UK: International Development Department, Department of Theology and Religion, Centre for West African Studies, Centre for the Study of Global Ethics.
- University of Bath, UK: Centre for Development Studies.
- Indian Institute of Dalit Studies, New Delhi.
- Nigerian Institute of Social and Economic Research, Ibadan.
- University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.
- Lahore University of Management Sciences, Pakistan.

In addition to the research partners, links have been forged with non-academic and non-government bodies, including Islamic Relief.

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Summary

This paper outlines the current situation in Northern Uganda and examines whether conventional approaches to conflict analysis produce a convincing diagnosis of the causes of the protracted conflict between the Ugandan government and the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). It concludes that the reasons for the war are multifaceted and do not neatly fit within any contemporary conflict theory without leaving significant gaps in the analysis. The paper highlights one of those gaps, the role of religion.

The paper draws on a variety of secondary sources and the author's extensive work in Africa, including Uganda, between 1996 and 2008. The history of the conflict in northern Uganda and the evolution of the LRA are outlined. With no access to significant economic resources such as diamonds or oil, no environmental driver, and no clash of civilizations, the war in northern Uganda appears to confound much conventional analysis of the rationality of violence in Africa. Clearly the key initial actors felt that they had lost out under the new regime and feared that Museveni would seek vengeance for the violence perpetrated by an Acholi-dominated military. However over time, those involved with the initial drivers have become fewer, as the ranks of the LRA have become filled with younger fighters, frequently abducted and then initiated.

The analysis concludes that

- Joseph Kony, the LRA's leader, has developed a cosmology based on a sense of victimhood that has been reinforced by the continual recruitment of child soldiers. This cosmology provides an internal management mechanism based on terror. Magical belief is commonly associated with lack of understanding, and magic is used by Kony and the LRA to rationalize something that is not understood – social exclusion. To the extent that the LRA has an ideology, it is anti-modern, anti-developmental and anti-state.
- The real key to the conflict is a massive failure of governance, which has contributed to a worsening cycle of social exclusion that has manifested itself as violent rejection of the status quo and a desire to return to a previous situation in which the Acholi had a better position. The Acholi civilian population feels socio-economically and politically excluded from a state perceived to be ethnically biased. It is caught between a rock and a hard place, between the army on the one hand and the LRA on the other.

The questions for conflict theory raised by this analysis relate to the need to include a religious worldview that does not fit with conventional explanations of conflict and to assess how far such a cosmology can influence an insurgency group to become an anti-development, anti-modern resistance movement.

Questions for the future include:

- While it is clear that the International Criminal Court's (ICC) involvement has probably led to the breaking of an impasse in the peace discussions, the question of whether it will be effective in bringing in the LRA (and Kony in particular) to justice remains.
- Whether current approaches to resolving the conflict will be effective: many of the reasons for the fighting are related to material and historical grievances, as well as continuing exclusion from economic networks, but at the same time, there is also an element of mysticism surrounding the LRA. It seems unlikely that any one approach will work, because different elements within the LRA attribute different weights to the material and spiritual explanations of their situation. It is possible that some elements of the LRA will respond to conventional negotiations, material settlements and security guarantees, and that these groups might split from Kony's core group.
- Where those members of the LRA who remain loyal to Kony as a quasi-cult leader will go: the majority are currently in impenetrable areas of the Northern DRC, but there have been rumours and reports of the LRA negotiating with the government of the Central Africa Republic and there are concerns that Kony will become a gun for hire in central Africa.
- How to ensure that large numbers of former combatants who have been brutalized and psychologically damaged by years of fighting with the LRA in the bush are re-integrated into Acholi society as part of the peace process.

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1   Introduction[1]

The war in Northern Uganda is one of the longest running conflicts in Africa and the Lords Resistance Army (LRA), its main protagonist, one of the most inscrutable entities currently engaged in fighting. This paper examines the LRA as a fighting force and, using the lenses of religion and development, explains why conventional conflict analysis approaches cannot fully explain its motivation or characteristics. An examination of its developmental and religious dimensions adds to existing analysis of the conflict and leads to a better understanding of the LRA as a conflict group and its relationship to the local population. This perspective is important at a time when current peace talks threaten to collapse due to lack of understanding of local politics and world views.

The LRA is an enigmatic movement: a Ugandan Parliamentary Commission into the war in northern Uganda failed to establish the cause or causes for which it is fighting (Van Acker, 2003). Even careful examination of the LRA does not reveal a clear set of war aims or convincing explanations for the conflict's long duration. As one western report put it, "common wisdom used to be that the reason for the LRA's survival was Sudanese sanctuary – but now [since agreement between the Ugandan and Sudanese governments has driven the LRA out of Sudan] it is hard to see what the problem is. The LRA is just a couple of kids and a few fanatics, and they ought to be extracted pretty easily" (Danna, 2002). This paper will argue that the LRA has developed an underlying philosophy based around Joseph Kony and a philosophy of victimhood that has been reinforced by the continual recruitment of child soldiers and a distancing from the original reasons for the rebellion. For Kony, this cosmology provides an internal management mechanism based on terror that supplements the conventional reasons for conflict and, it is suggested, is likely to contribute to an eventual split in the LRA ranks.

In western news reports, the LRA is associated with child soldiers and fanaticism (see also Danna, 2002), while the demonization of Kony as an 'evil' witchdoctor is common in Uganda itself, not least by President Museveni. It is argued here, however, that this demonization of the LRA leadership has prevented meaningful analysis, not least in the western media, of the root causes of the conflict and the reasons why the war has become so brutal[2]. There has been a lack of detailed analysis of the

social drivers of the conflict and its effects on the local civilian population, particularly socio-economic and political exclusion and violence based on alienation from a state perceived to be ethnically biased. Clearly there are material issues at stake within the conflict, but it is argued that to fully understand its origins and continuation, it is also necessary to root the analysis in Acholi cosmology and identity.

It will be argued in this paper that the core of Kony's philosophy is an anti-development religious worldview based on exclusion and self-punishment, a worldview that he holds for both pragmatic reasons and to reinforce a sense of group identity. To the extent that an ideology of the LRA exists, it is anti-modern, anti-developmental and anti-state, whilst (perversely) challenging the marginalization of the social group it represents. Because of the Acholi's experience of political and economic marginalization, the issue of ethnic identity is critical, and this identity has quasi-religious underpinnings. Thus the historical development of the LRA is linked to the fortunes of the Acholi vis à vis the state, an understanding of which is critical to a convincing analysis of the conflict. In addition, it will be argued that an understanding of the Acholi's cosmological worldview, especially as it is expressed by Kony himself, is essential to understanding both the LRA and wider Acholi attitudes to the ongoing conflict and violence.

The paper begins by outlining some current approaches to the analysis of conflict in Africa, concluding that no single approach fits the conflict in northern Uganda, although elements of all of them may be valid. It argues that a lens that brings in both religion and inequality provides a useful addition to the analysis of this conflict, because it enables the links between identity, marginalization, religion and the conflict to be analysed, filling key gaps in current understanding of the LRA. The body of the paper consists of a historical analysis of the conflict in northern Uganda. It argues that the quasi-religious fervour of the LRA mitigates against 'rational' explanations of conflict and is an important element in understanding the nature of LRA institutions and the importance of Joseph Kony as a cult leader. The importance of the ideology of the LRA, such as it is, is in its links with local Acholi identity and the binding effect of an understanding of the world based on exclusion from the state. Finally, the argument is summarized and some of its implications for the peace process briefly discussed.

2 Conflict explanations and the importance of religion

A detailed analysis of all conflict theories is beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, it concentrates on the most influential set of theories – those that take a political economy approach to conflict analysis - and their critics. Within the 'political economy school', several analysts argue that violence is embedded in social, economic and political institutions, also emphasizing the vested interests of the armed groups within the conflict (Duffield, 1998a). At the same time, many analysts argue that conflicts continue because of the inability of political elites (or states) to address underlying issues, such as poverty, unemployment or ethnic identity (Nafzinger and Auvinen, 1997; Azam, 1999; Cliffe and Luckham, 1999; Kaldor, 1999).

This section concentrates on outlining the core elements of the political economy approach to conflict, including the greed versus grievance dichotomy embedded in many current policy approaches. Whilst there is insufficient space to fully examine alternative theories, some key criticisms are outlined, particularly those that focus on social explanations of conflict and the importance of identity.

In the 1990s, there was a clear change in emphasis amongst conflict analysts towards foregrounding economic factors (Berdal and Malone, 2000). For example, although many conflicts were accepted as resulting from crises of state legitimacy, governance or economic dislocation, it is also recognized that a continuing economic incentive to maintain a war economy arises from the conflict itself. Initial economic factors have thus become a key factor in the chronic war economies of Sub-Saharan Africa; while the birth of conflicts is said by many to have been political, their continuation is regarded as economic.

Cliffe and Luckham make three distinctions between forms of economically motivated violence (1999):

1. Top-down violence mobilized by elites and bottom-up violence mobilized by 'rebels', so-called 'subaltern violence'.
2. Violence mediated by the state, where access to resources through state organs is the source of conflict, and unmediated violence, such as clan or warlord protection rackets.
3. Violence driven by greed and violence driven by grievance based on past deprivation and inequality (see also Stewart, 2000).

These three axes provide a useful analytical framework for examining conflicts, although in many ways they raise more questions than they answer, not least concerning differences between leaders and followers, distinctions between group and individual motivation, and ascertaining what rationality actually means in specific circumstances. Nevertheless, the distinctions do provide a lens through which to consider the changing nature of African conflicts.

Top-down violence has historically been associated with organized systems of state repression (so-called 'silent' violence), rather than open warfare. However, during the 1990s, regime control over patronage, resources and the means of violence seriously declined due to a mixture of donor power, fiscal crises, reforms and the nature of states themselves. Once control is lost, political actors seek a variety of means of constructing alternative quasi-governance structures outside the decaying state. This has involved the development of private armies, militias and mercenaries, and the direct control of geographical areas containing valuable resources such as diamonds, hardwoods, rubber and oil. At the same time, the decline of the state has led to a fragmentation of control over resources, as disaffected and unpaid soldiers (amongst others) have essentially privatized themselves, coalescing around particular identities. In this way peacetime crime has become associated with the existence of war economies. The incentive to take over valuable commodities has been strengthened by the opening up of the global economy. Mark Duffield's assertion that armed groups "act locally, but think globally" is reinforced by the burgeoning international trade in conflict commodities from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sierra Leone and Angola, amongst others (Duffield, 1998b).

There have been parallel transformations in the development of subaltern movements. The previous, well-known, model was one of liberation from colonial rule, followed by post-colonial 'reform' wars such as the Tigrean People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) in Ethiopia, or the National Resistance Army (NRA) in Uganda. In this model, an open war is waged against a regime that is seen as being illegitimate. Such wars have typically had clear political objectives, enjoyed popular support and been fought by well-disciplined and motivated forces, often very effectively, with substantial external support.

This rather clear-cut distinction has been called into question since the early 1990s as forms of privatized violence have emerged and identities have become more fragmented. Even existing

movements, such as the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), have changed into complex entities comprised of rivalrous internal identities, motivated by greed, ideology or identity. At the same time, the underlying motivations of subaltern groups remain, particularly poverty and the lack of alternative opportunities for betterment, while their frustration with state failure to deal with their problems has increased as the state itself has declined. Several recent studies, such as that of Richards (1996), have emphasized the importance of alienation amongst young people as a primary factor in the emergence of 'militia' groups which seek to attain economic gain and short term 'power' through violence, without the threat of punishment from an ineffective state apparatus. The motivated, well-disciplined groups of the liberation wars have given way to disaffected youths seeking economic and other gains through violence. This reinvention of identity around a common cause rather than ideology is implicated in the development of youth violence, as well as criminal gangs and insurgency movements like the LRA. It may or may not be linked with ethnicity, although clearly ethnicity is an obvious mobilizing factor in an 'us versus them' conflict[3].

The second of the three distinctions mirrors the changes in the first. The liberation wars provided a clear military role for the state: counterinsurgency. This was often relatively successful in pure military terms but unsustainable in the long run because of its resource demands (for example in Rhodesia). However, as the power of states themselves has declined, and with it the attractiveness of the resources available to potential opposition groups, violence has become increasingly unmediated by states. The warlord economies in Liberia and in Somalia, for example, were explicitly outside the state, being run through a proto-feudal system of primitive accumulation (Jackson, 2003).

At the same time, the state is not yet irrelevant. The experience of Uganda since independence in 1962 is a long story of alternating ethnically-based control of the state. The regimes of Obote I, Amin in the 1970s and Obote II in the early 1980s were all characterized by the takeover of the state by specific ethnic groups, which ran it for their own benefit. In most African countries, the state has become a source of resources with which to support patronage networks and, by extension, the means of violence (Chabal and Daloz, 1999). In the 'new wars', in contrast, some warlords and other groups have been able to construct alternative governance systems without accessing the state.

An influential literature, particularly the statistical studies done by Collier and Hoeffler, seems to support the assertion that greed is more important than grievance in Africa's wars. Collier, for

example, links the economic factors involved in conflict directly to a neo-classical economic framework (1999). His model proxies economic agendas (reasons for greed) through measures of the share of primary commodities in GDP, the proportion of young men in a country and average years of education. Primary commodities represent 'lootable' opportunities or opportunities for predatory taxation, the number of young men a pool of potential recruits and the educational indicator partly captures the employment opportunities available to these young men and the extent of their poverty. In the model, grievances may be captured by measures of ethnic and religious fragmentation, inequality in access to land, the extent of political rights and the per capita economic growth rate. Collier's statistical results suggest that some societies are more prone to conflict simply because they offer more inviting economic prospects for rebellion.

Collier further argues in support of his findings that grievance-based explanations have a free rider problem, with justice, revenge and relief from grievances acting as disincentives to rebellion and people being unwilling to fight for a cause where the outcome is uncertain. In contrast, a greed-motivated rebellion is said to avoid the free rider problem through restricting the benefits of a conflict to the participants and allowing the predatory taxation of primary commodities. Furthermore, such rebellions do not need the carrot of a final 'victory', if recruits can be paid off immediately and continuously with commodity rents. Clearly, in this view, in true market fashion, wars in Africa can be explained explicitly in terms of overcoming the free rider problem and implicitly by the aggregation of individuals' rational utility maximizing choices (Cramer, 2006).

There are, of course, several problems with this approach, not least the arguments of Wolf and Homer-Dixon that emphasize how grievances arise from a mix of resource scarcity with social inequality and human rights abuses (Homer-Dixon and Blitt, 1998; Wolf, 1969). Messner et al take this further, asserting that violent struggles arise as much out of *perceptions* of grievances as from absolute shortages (Messner et al, 1998). In addition, Collier's cross-national correlation approach is highly stylized and reliant on a few key assumptions regarding the proxy measures used. For example, many would regard youth impoverishment as being as symptomatic of social inequality as of 'greed' and, whilst inequality has no effect on the calculations, political repression and a high degree of religious and ethnic fragmentation have the opposite to their predicted effects. Cramer further argues that, while this model has theoretical elegance, it lacks social understanding and is therefore removed

from the reality of conflict itself, lacking the ability to track the historical transformation of conflicts (Cramer, 2006).

Such a deterministic approach has, predictably, led to a series of alternative explanations of conflict, particularly from the field of anthropology. Historically, anthropology has somewhat downplayed the occurrence of conflict within many of the cultures studied, assuming that conflict was not the norm, but a departure from the norm. However, a group of more recent analysts, led primarily by Richards, Knauft and Koptyoff, have begun to reassess anthropological approaches to conflict, seeing violence as a pattern embedded in society, rather than the more Hobbesian view of war as a state of nature overcome by a social contract (Knauft, 1990; Richards, 1996; Koptyoff, 1987). In particular such approaches highlight two main elements: that wars are a result of social processes and that mono-causal perspectives (greed, resources, etc.) are ultimately inadequate as explanations of conflict. Such approaches could be interpreted as a post-modernist rejection of meta-theory, but in practice they are based on a recognition of what actually happens on the ground and what combatants themselves feel about their motivations for involvement in violence, which can be linked to the idea of internally generated ideologies or quasi-religions as internal mechanisms for explaining social phenomena, including violence.

In particular, Koptyoff, looking at pre-colonial Africa, sets out a view that mirrors Knauft's work in Melanesia, in which he considers 'loser' groups, i.e. those excluded from political and economic networks. Koptyoff sees such groups as giving rise to a positive form of political development in pre-colonial Africa, given the generally low population densities and the limited reach of existing power structures. Such groups, in his view, contributed to political development and social formation through taking an exit option, forming their own polities beyond established kingdom boundaries. Social upheaval, frequently through wars that were usually waged by excluded groups, he suggests, could be seen as socially creative, in the sense that it gave rise to new polities, social structures and economic networks[4].

Specifically, Koptyoff and others discuss the re-enaction or reinvention of 'traditional' social structures, usually based upon some idealized or mutated idea of prior social perfection (see also Ranger, 1983; Mamdani, 1996)[5]. This analysis recognizes war as part of a bigger process of societal change,

specifically a radical means of making and unmaking institutions. In an African context, in other words, there is a recognized tradition of a particular group that identifies itself as a 'loser group' taking an exit strategy from a state that cannot maintain and project its own power. Such a process of reinvention requires a logic or ideology of exit capable of answering questions such as 'What makes 'us' a loser group? How do we explain our present position? And what do we have to do to improve our position?'

Religion and teleological explanations of earthly situations are common elements in such a logic or ideology. In Africa, the use of magic as an everyday tool in contemporary politics and conflict is common, so it is perhaps unsurprising that if a contemporary insurgency movement is examined through a religious lens, light can be shed on why a standard political economy explanation of conflict is inadequate. The approach taken in this paper, therefore, is to look explicitly at the ideology of the LRA, which casts Kony as a quasi-mystic seeking to justify and sustain a violent conflict with the Ugandan state. Based on the self-identification of the Acholi as a loser group, Kony has invented a quasi-religion based on the idea that the Acholi are victims not only of Museveni's political vindictiveness but also of stronger cosmological forces, requiring a strategy based not just on violent struggle against the state but also repentance and internal cleansing. To see how this worldview has developed over time, it is necessary to look in more detail at the evolution of the LRA itself and how the conflict in northern Uganda has moved through a series of distinct cycles linked with changes in modus operandi and associated ideology.

3 The Lord's Resistance Army, the Ugandan state and the war in northern Uganda

The war in northern Uganda can be divided into a series of distinct if overlapping phases. Each stage has seen a slightly different mode of violence. The initial stage can be characterized as conventional warfare, followed by the far less conventional approach of the Holy Spirit Movement (HSM), which gave way to Joseph Kony and the LRA. Kony's war itself can be divided into three sub-stages of escalating violence.

The initial period of resistance to Museveni and the National Resistance Army (NRA) was largely conventional. In Sudan, elements of the former Ugandan National Liberation Army (UNLA) and those loyal to Idi Amin, largely from the province of West Nile, along with groups of Obote supporters, formed the Uganda People's Defence Army (UPDA), which launched attacks around Gulu and Kitgum[6]. Despite Acholi support, the UPDA was unable to follow up its initial success. Running out of ammunition, by the end of 1986, many former soldiers had come to think that they could not win a war against the NRA. In effect, the UPDA split, with some signing the Gulu Peace Accord and many returning to Sudan and joining one of several insurgency movements, including the newly formed Holy Spirit Movement (HSM) (see below). Some 2,000 former UPDA soldiers were incorporated into the NRA, some prisoners of war were released and the resettlement of civilians was started.

3.1 The pre-history of the LRA: the Holy Spirit Movement

Ideologically and tactically, the emergence of the Holy Spirit Movement led by Alice Lawkena represents a complete change of direction from conventional insurgency in Uganda. Lawkena is said to be the spirit of an Italian who died during the First World War. It was claimed that this spirit took possession of a woman called Alice on May 25th 1985. First, Alice believed that Lawkena was directing her towards healing, but then that it had redefined her purpose as the head of a new movement, the Holy Spirit Movement (HSM). Alice, along with most Acholi, believed that the Acholi people were in danger of being wiped out. The imminence of total destruction, in her view, demanded a different approach from conventional warfare. She believed that survival could only be assured through the creation of a supernatural Acholi force. Joined by some former government soldiers, victory in a small skirmish at Kilak Corner in November 1986 convinced others that Alice did indeed have 'the power'.

The details of the HSM campaigns are beyond the scope of this paper, but the symbolism is relevant to the subsequent development of the LRA. The Acholi world is a dense spiritual community populated

by spirits, powers and ghosts. The series of catastrophes inflicted on the Acholi during the twentieth century, including their fall from grace following the end of the Obote regime[7], were associated by them with the weakness of their own spirits, leading to both the appropriation of more successful spirits (Jesus, Allah) and also a view that conflict is a form of healing through which people can be purified. Claiming possession by the Holy Spirit, Alice also claimed to be able to cast out *cen*, the malevolent spirits of those who had been killed by soldiers, and to replace them with angels. Protected by angels, it was believed, the pure could not be killed. Alice stated that the aim of her campaign was "two hundred years of peace", whereas in reality the HSM was a type of millennial movement (Doom and Vlassenroot, 2004)[8].

Alice was not short of support. At one stage the HSM was reputedly 18,000 strong and the effect on the morale of NRA troops suddenly faced with large numbers of people smothered in oil, carrying bibles and religious objects, and throwing stones seems to have been adverse (Allen, 2005). Early successes led to further recruitment, until the advance of the HSM was finally stopped around Jinja in 1987. While the HSM was, therefore, a relatively short-lived movement, the repercussions of its emergence have had long-lasting effects in the north of Uganda. In particular, the contemporary conflict has been influenced by the supposed role of spirits in the LRA, the strong emphasis on internal regulation, local support from the population and, finally, the view of conflict as a form of healing and purification.

3.2   Joseph Kony and the LRA

The parliamentary commission into the war in Northern Uganda came to the conclusion that it was unable "to establish the cause or causes for which LRA is fighting" (Van Acker, 2003). Certainly the LRA is one of the most enigmatic of all movements in Sub-Saharan Africa, and it is not clear whether it has any specific final goals, or even a defined political agenda. Kony himself uses the term *adui* (rebel) to describe his followers, whereas Museveni has frequently referred to Kony as a "common criminal" and likened negotiating with him to "giving first aid to a snake" (Jackson, 2002).

Kony himself appears to possess personal charisma and a flair for theatrical gestures. He is said to wear aviator's spectacles; to have long hair; and to occasionally appear in women's clothes, probably to shock or confuse his audience; while escapees talk of him having a "mesmeric voice" (HRW,

1997). Initially, he drew on the soldiers of his earlier command under the UPDA, supplementing them with stragglers from the HSM and the post-HSM movement, the Lord's Army, which was founded by Sevarino Lukoya, Alice's father, but which had collapsed by 1989. Kony further developed Alice's radical belief system, constructing the LRA around the idea of a radical transformation of the Acholi from *within* – a moral crusade – in which the associated violence is seen as a sacramental act, thereby legitimating that violence.

In reality, the LRA was unsuccessful on the ground. Lacking the vast popular support of Alice, the LRA eventually lost the minimal support it had amongst the war-weary Acholi. After 1991, the government also mounted a successful counter-insurgency operation, *Operation North*, which almost destroyed the LRA. Throughout 1993, formal peace talks were held between Kony and the government. LRA troops began to filter back into the towns and there were even reports of fraternization with government soldiers. However, almost without warning, Kony announced that he had been betrayed by Acholi elders and promptly stopped the peace process. What exactly happened remains unclear, but it seems likely that there was some double-dealing between the government and Acholi politicians in exile. It is also true that several army officers were unwilling to make peace with the LRA. Kony asked for an extension of six months to consider how to take the process forward and at this point Museveni appears to have lost patience and issued an ultimatum, ordering the LRA to hand over its weapons within one week, otherwise the army would eradicate it. This statement destroyed the peace negotiations.

By 1994, the intervention of the Sudanese government changed the situation and revived the LRA. From new bases in Southern Sudan, the re-armed LRA resumed violence, becoming active against the SPLA as well as in northern Uganda. At the same time, the 'purification' of the Acholi accelerated, with a series of massacres and an escalation of human rights violations, including the use of abduction as the main means of recruitment to the LRA (HRW, 1997). The Acholi themselves have therefore become targets in a war that appears to have become one of auto-genocide. At the same time, government troops have not been very effective. Many of them see the north as almost a foreign country and much of the fighting was left to poorly equipped and trained local defence units. The net result of this was violent chaos, with civilians caught in the middle.

Since 1994, the army has been involved in a series of classic counter-insurgency operations, not least developing 'safe havens'. Of the internal refugees in northern Uganda, around 75,000 were forcibly removed to 'protected villages'. Some of these villages are occupied permanently, whereas others are only occupied at night, and several are located next to military bases. The fact that several barracks are located *inside* the villages has led many Acholi to question exactly who is protecting whom (Finnstrom, 1999).

In 1999 the governments of Uganda and Sudan signed the Nairobi Agreement. In this document, they agreed to renew the diplomatic ties that had been severed in 1995 and to stop supporting rebel movements in each other's countries. Sudanese President, Omar el Bashir, talked openly of former Sudanese support for the LRA in terms of logistics and arms and announced a total withdrawal of support for Kony (Jackson, 2002). In response, the LRA attacked the hand that had formerly fed it and there were frequent reports of Sudanese villages being attacked by LRA groups (Jackson, 2002)[9]. However, it appeared that the LRA was running short of food and drugs and that its command and control system was collapsing. Isolated from its regional support, suffering from widespread desertions, facing a better-patrolled Sudan/Uganda border on both sides, and having lost its secure bases, its future looked bleak.

The Nairobi Agreement led to a relatively peaceful period. With both the Ugandan and Sudanese governments agreeing, at least in public, not to support insurgent groups in each other's territory, Kony, as a client of the Sudanese government, was forced to reassess his position. In addition, an outbreak of the Ebola virus around Gulu in 2000 forced the rebels out of Uganda. However, the new accord between Sudan and Uganda also led to a separate protocol that allowed the launching of *Operation Iron Fist* in April 2002 by Ugandan troops against LRA bases in Sudan. The army sweep across Sudanese territory forced the LRA back into Uganda, where it increased its attacks on Acholi targets. Nevertheless, the peace process itself had already placed significant pressure on both the internal management structure of the LRA and a rank and file that consists predominantly of brutalized victims of kidnapping. There were significant splits, with several LRA troops and senior leaders giving themselves up. These splits led to conflicts within the LRA, culminating with the reported killing of Kony's deputy Otti in November 2007 (Lewis, 2007). Since this period the LRA has effectively split between a group inside Equatoria province of Southern Sudan and a group, under Kony, that relocated to the northern DRC and then across into the Central African Republic[10].

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3.3   The LRA, the Acholi and the marginalization of Northern Uganda

Alice and Kony both blamed the sins of the Acholi themselves for almost destroying their group. They both believed that the Acholi were about to be wiped out in massacres and reprisals, driving them to look for a spiritual escape (Green, 2008). While an interpretation that religion was just a disguise for a deeper political motive seems obvious, it is difficult to sustain this in the face of the evidence. Clearly one of the key drivers of such a long conflict is fear (see Jackson, 2002; Vinci, 2005). When the NRA took power in 1986, the remaining UNLA forces, most of which were Acholi, following the colonial identification of them as a 'martial race' and recruitment from marginalized areas of the country, fled north, fearing reprisals for their role under Amin and then Obote. Civilians in Acholi-land also feared the worst. The history of political takeovers in Uganda had not been a happy one and the Acholi had been involved in several massacres as either perpetrators or victims. Their fears were partially confirmed in several clumsy actions by the government and some NRA soldiers.

These events fed the paranoia already rampant amongst the Acholi. Fear and despair at their lack of development led large numbers of Acholi to become susceptible to the belief that the end was near. Despair led to desperation and Alice offered them a way out: redemption. Her argument was that the Acholi were close to economic destruction and therefore needed to reject their past failures, and her solution was a rejection of modernity and a retreat to spirituality, based on the traditional cosmology of the Acholi with added Biblical elements. This was carried on by Kony, whose outlook appears to have been hardened by the events of 1994 and his 'betrayal' by Acholi elders. His desperation in the face of Acholi indifference seems to have led to his turning violent on his own people. The young were abducted, not only because they were easier to indoctrinate, but also because Kony had effectively given up on the adults (Jackson, 2002; Vinci, 2005). This left the majority of the population stranded between the LRA on the one hand and a hostile army on the other, a further marginalization that feeds into current demands for justice and rehabilitation.

The civilian population is both the key to the conflict and its victim. The widespread internment of civilians in camps and the abduction of children effectively leaves the population is a constant state of fear and insecurity. Abduction of children and their incorporation into the LRA has created a 'negative support network' amongst the Acholi. Virtually every extended family in Acholi-land has had someone abducted. Although families of the abducted may not positively support the LRA, they are unlikely to

support the government: "… your own child is living as a rebel. So if the rebels come through and demand food or information, it is not only your fear for yourself, you think also of your child, and hope that your own child is not hungry" (HRW, 1997). At the same time, those who have been abducted are forced to carry out violence against their own people, which alienates the civilian population from the LRA and acts as a huge obstacle to reintegration if child soldiers do make contact with their families again or escape from the LRA (Green, 2008).

Paranoia is primarily about perceptions, and perceptions are linked to underlying understandings of identity. In particular, it matters little what is actually happening, if there is an alternative perception of what is happening. The Acholi have a number of collective beliefs about the motivations of the government that are based partly on their historical experience but also to a considerable extent on rumour, and that greatly contribute to their sense of marginalization within Uganda. Firstly, there is the question of land. Under colonial rule, settlers could effectively grab any land not currently under cultivation, claiming it as 'unused' or not 'effectively' owned. Even today, the current Gulu District Plan identifies only around 10 per cent of land as under cultivation, implying that the remaining 90 per cent is not 'effectively' owned. This has led many Acholi to believe and indeed to openly state that the government is engaged in a vast resettlement plan intended to push out the Acholi and replace them with southerners. Perhaps more far-fetched but equally powerful is the view that Tutsis from Rwanda will be settled in the north of Uganda by Museveni, a reference to the widespread of use of Rwandan Tutsi troops by the NRA and the close links between Uganda and Rwandan Tutsis, not least the personal links between Paul Kagame and Museveni. The resettlement argument, of course, also provides a convenient explanation for Museveni's failure to end the war. After all, since the majority of the victims are Acholi, how better to depopulate the region?

A second aspect of marginalization concerns the nature of the Acholi economy and particularly government de-stocking of the cattle population. It is difficult to over-estimate the importance of cattle to the people of northern Uganda: they represent the bedrock of the economy and the main way of accumulating capital; provide a significant source of draught animals, food and dowries; and act as a means to settle disputes. Between 1986 and 1987, there was a cattle exodus. Westbrook, for example, estimates that the cattle population of Kitgum fell from 156,667 to 3,239, while the national cattle stock rose from 3 to 5.6 million over the same period (Westbrook, 2000). The Acholi believe that

the government and the army were implicated in what they regard as the theft of their cattle (Finnstrom, 1999). Removing cattle from Acholi-land effectively removed one of the main economic and social roots of Acholi society.

Lastly, perceptions have not been helped by the view of many southerners, particularly those in the security forces, that the north is virtually another country. The new government military, the Ugandan People's Defence Force (UPDF)[11], has been guilty of a series of violations of human rights, including the systematic rape of both men and women, usually in the presence of their families, the murder of civilians, and the burying alive of civilians by soldiers (HRW, 1997). These have fuelled bitterness amongst the Acholi. Many southerners are in denial about these issues, while many others blame the Acholi themselves. Lt. General Kazini of the UPDF, for example, has attributed the abuses of the Acholi by the UPDF to the nature of Acholi society itself, stating that "If anything, it is the local Acholi soldiers causing the problems. It's the cultural background of the people here; they are very violent. It's genetic" (Van Acker, 2003).

These contributory conflict drivers represent a relatively conventional picture of a marginalized region and a marginalized ethnic group. Real and perceived socio-economic and political marginalization has resulted in a collective belief amongst the Acholi that they are victims of the Ugandan state and so are in a state of "perpetual torture" (Dolan, 2005).

The quasi-religious aspects of Kony's internal cosmology take this sense of victimhood and expand it, through a magpie-like propensity to adopt elements from other belief systems into which he has come into contact. The result is a hotch-potch of beliefs that are used to reinforce the idea that the Acholi are victims and Kony the mystic who can stop protect them. Violence, in this world-view, is conveniently seen as a means of 'cleansing' – an evil that is necessary to purify the Acholi so that they can be saved (Van Acker, 2003). The use of child soldiers within this model is clear – it is easier to brainwash younger minds into a world view such as this when they have little experience of the real underlying – and possibly legitimate – reasons why the Acholi have a grievance against the Ugandan government. Whilst the cosmology may have been designed to hide the real underlying (and conventional) reasons for conflict, it has gained more influence as the LRA itself has become distanced from the roots of the conflict. Several processes are probably at work here: the passing of time, the way in which religion in the internal management of the LRA, and the increased socialization of child soldiers the longer they

remain with the LRA. Whether the cosmology is true or false is irrelevant if the foot soldiers (and probably Kony himself) actually believe it.

4 Conclusion

This paper has shown how the progressive marginalization of northern Uganda and the Acholi people has led to a situation of chronic conflict with multiple and complex drivers. In this section, the argument will first be summarized. Finally, some of the implications of the analysis for the peace process will be briefly explored.

Whilst the root of the conflict in northern Uganda is undoubtedly power and resources, the protracted alienation of the Acholi from access to power has led to the development of a particular view of the world informed by a specific adaptation of traditional cosmology. Whilst this world view should not be seen as a key driver of the conflict, it has become increasingly important as a rationale for a cycle of violence that has become progressively more violent. The invention of an anti-modern discourse has allowed Kony and his acolytes to develop an understanding of their current situation and to use this world view as a means of indoctrinating LRA members (especially children), based on a shared belief system founded on terror.

At the same time, the majority of the population is effectively caught between a rock and a hard place, between the army as an arm of vengeance on the one hand, and the LRA, which regards the Acholi as being in need of 'cleansing', on the other. Violence is intimately entwined with cosmological views of place and identity in Acholi-land and the actions taken during the war need to be analysed in terms of societal changes within a failed society that has been systematically excluded from the state. Within this framework, the LRA has formed an anti-development religious worldview based on exclusion and self-punishment, both for reasons of pragmatism and group discipline, and also as a means of rationalizing its own situation. Magical belief is commonly associated with lack of understanding, and magic here is used to rationalize something that is not understood – social exclusion.

The exclusion of the Acholi from government and the commonly held belief that the current Ugandan army is seeking vengeance for past violence perpetrated by Acholi officers during previous regimes are important parts of this world view. Kony appears to have adopted the populist magic of Alice and twisted it into a specific cosmology that casts the Acholi as being unclean and therefore in need of cleansing in order to strengthen their own cosmos in the spiritual fight against the spirits of the invaders. Whether this represents an ideology as such is debateable. Moreover, although it is clear that such views are held by members of the LRA, it is unclear both how widespread they are and whether members have any choice.

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With no access to significant economic resources such as diamonds or oil, no environmental driver, and no clash of civilizations, the war in northern Uganda appears to confound much conventional analysis of the rationality of violence in Africa. Even the more helpful anthropological perspective fails to identify some of the issues. Whilst the analysis presented in this paper may lead us into the rather nihilistic approach of the 'new barbarism' thesis, this also misses the point of much of the violence – it is directed and meaningful, not random.

The real key is a massive failure of governance, which has contributed to a worsening cycle of social exclusion that has manifested itself as violent rejection of the status quo and a desire to return to a previous situation in which the Acholi had a better position. The damaging cycle of political dominance based on ethnicity, accompanied by access to the resources that are associated with control of the military, has grown progressively more violent as competition for increasingly scarce resources has intensified. Eventually this led to tit-for-tat violence between rival groups that escalated into the massacre of civilians.

This analysis resonates with Koptyoff's concept of African politics as influenced by 'loser groups' who are able to exercise an exit option from formal polities. At first sight, this explanation appears to be valid. Clearly the key actors in the initial period of the conflict were those who felt that they had lost out under the new regime of Museveni, coupled with those who feared that Museveni would seek vengeance for the violence perpetrated by an Acholi-dominated military. However over time, those involved with these initial drivers have become fewer, as the ranks of the LRA have become filled with younger fighters, frequently abducted and then initiated. There are also political splits within the movement, notably between those who leave and those who stay in the bush, but also between those who are in the bush and the Acholi diaspora. The diaspora group engaged in the peace talks, for example, appears to have a different agenda to Kony and the 'real' LRA and it is not clear whether or not they have legitimacy.

These splits also raise the question of whether one single conflict theory can encompass all of the different strands of the Ugandan conflict. It may be that the diaspora is motivated by a fairly clear agenda arising from their perception of the Acholi as a loser group following Museveni's victory, and it is also true that several members of this group are former members of the military. However, this is

not the case with either Kony himself or some of his followers in the bush, who appear to have developed their own ideology independently of the initial foundation myth of the resistance movement.

Such explanations do not fit clearly into any of the contemporary conflict theories, although elements of several can add to understanding of the movement. The LRA and the war in Uganda clearly does not fit the greed versus grievance dichotomy, although there are elements that resemble grievances (Jackson, 2002). Moreover, a conception of the LRA as a loser group becomes more complex later in its development, when internal cleansing rather than violence against the government or exit appears to be advocated as the answer to the problems of the Acholi.

The current methods used by the Ugandan army do not lead the Acholi to believe that they will be included in government under the current regime and so they believe that they are excluded from political representation and the benefits of inclusion. Furthermore, it is also common to hear of the Acholi discussing Museveni's 'revenge' against them. In short, the Acholi civilian population are caught between a rock and a hard place, outside formal governance and subject to violence from both sides.

An important question is whether the International Criminal Court's (ICC) involvement and its perception of justice could be effective in bringing in the LRA (and Kony in particular) to justice. It is clear that Kony will not agree to face proceedings just because there is a warrant on his head, although it is also clear that ICC involvement has probably led to the breaking of an impasse in the peace discussions. However the LRA itself views the ICC warrants as indicating that the state aims to blame it for the violence, whereas in its view it is fighting state oppression, implying that the Uganda military should also be subject to ICC warrants. At the same time, there have been numerous reports of former combatants turning themselves in, which may show that the religious elements of Kony's cosmology and practice are breaking down as a means of keeping combatants within the group.
A key question is whether current approaches to resolving the conflict will be as effective as predicted. The answer is related to both the causes of the conflict and the nature of the LRA. Fundamentally the LRA's struggle is a conventional rebellion with an added cosmological dimension. Many of the reasons for the fighting are related to material and historical grievances, as well as continuing exclusion from economic networks. At the same time, there is also an element of mysticism surrounding the LRA, which may affect the balance of any peace process. Clearly if the material issues are important, then

conventional approaches to peace-making will provide an incentive to end the fighting, but these are likely to be less effective if the mystical elements of Kony's ideology are more important. It is the contention of this paper that no one approach will work, because different elements within the LRA attribute different weights to the material and spiritual explanations of their situation. In particular, it seems likely that Kony will want to keep the LRA going no matter what, both because he has no desire to go to jail and because he is effectively a cult leader. If this is the case, it would be possible to make a case for eliminating Kony himself, however uncomfortable this is.

Another uncertainty that makes the outcome of the peace discussions difficult to predict is that, although much can be made of the religious/mystical element that binds its members into the LRA, it is not clear how many of them would simply return to their homes if given the chance. Clearly some elements of the LRA are negotiating, although their various constituencies are not always clear. For example, the position of the Acholi Diaspora Group, which is one of those involved in peace talks, may not be the same as Kony's own position, although as always the latter is unclear. It is possible that some elements of the LRA will respond to conventional negotiations, material settlements and security guarantees, and that these groups would split from Kony's core group. The question remains of how much of the LRA will remain loyal to Kony and continue to engage in violence. There is also a question of where they will go: as noted above, the majority are currently in impenetrable areas of the Northern DRC, but there have been rumours and reports of the LRA negotiating with the government of the Central Africa Republic and certainly there are concerns that Kony will become a gun for hire in central Africa.

Apart from the possible persistence of a smaller version of the LRA under Kony, the authorities are also faced with the need to re-integrate large numbers of former combatants who have been brutalized and psychologically damaged by years of fighting with the LRA in the bush. This raises questions about how the peace process can ensure their wellbeing and social acceptance. Given that Kony has exercised strong psychological control over many of these fighters from a very young age and the violent nature of many LRA actions against the civilian population, it will require a herculean effort to bring about a settled and peaceful community within northern Uganda.

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Notes

1. This paper is framed by the author's extensive work in Africa, including work in Uganda at various times between 1996 and 2008. It was originally presented at a seminar entitled Religion in the public and private spheres: implications for development policy and practice, organized by the Religions and Development Research Programme at the University of Birmingham on 26th January, 2009.

2. This is despite a growing literature on other African conflicts, particularly in West Africa, by analysts including David Keen, Paul Richards, Christopher Clapham and Stephen Ellis. Analysis of the Ugandan insurgency has been dominated by anthropologists, particularly Heike Behrend, partly because the conflict does not clearly fit a political economy approach.

3. For example, whilst the LRA in Uganda is primarily comprised of Acholi, the RUF in Sierra Leone is predominantly made up of disaffected youth bound together by their shared alienation.

4. This work is part of a tradition of African historiography. See also Smith, 1976; Chabal, 1986; Jackson, 1990; Vansina, 1990; Young, 1994; Herbst, 2000

5. David Strang (1996) argues that there has been a long-term western project of de-legitimizing non-western sovereignty, which has inevitably seeped into the academic literature on state formation and colonialism.

6. The violence was worsened by the arrival of the Federal Democratic Movement (FEDEMU), an anti-Obote II Luwero group incorporated into the 35th Battalion of the NRA. From the beginning FEDEMU was motivated by revenge against the Acholi and the FEDEMU forces were implicated in a series of massacres, which led to a final loss of confidence in the government amongst the Acholi.

7. The Acholi had been closely associated with the security services in the postcolonial period. As a colonial 'martial race', they had developed an expectation that the income associated with the military, in particular, was something that they could access. This reached its apogee during the Amin and then Obote regimes and for a short period after the end of the Obote regime, the one and only Acholi President Okello, held power. However following the advent of Museveni and his war against the Acholi-dominated military, the Acholi found themselves excluded from their traditional colonial and postcolonial role.

8. Internal regulation was through a list of twenty 'holy spirit precautions' that were rigorously enforced within the movement, something that Kony has echoed with the 'ten commandments' of the LRA. This profoundly bizarre list included men having two testicles ('neither more nor less') and a selection of Old Testament commands such as not stealing or killing snakes, an initiation ritual involving shea butter oil and holy water, granting the ability to change stones into grenades, and transforming bees and snakes into allies. Soldiers were also banned from taking cover behind anthills.

9. The agreement between Sudan and Uganda was also threatened when Ugandan troops undertaking Operation 'Iron Fist' were bombed by the Sudanese Air Force 'by accident'.

10. Their current location in the CAR is regarded as a regional security threat since there are certainly rumours that the current Government of the CAR is actively supporting the LRA and intends to use them as a force for regional destabilization – a mercenary force.

11. The UPDF was the renamed insurgency force commanded by Museveni, originally called the National Resistance Army (the armed wing of the National Resistance Movement, later to be reinvented as the Movement).

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