African Conflicts and Conflicts Drivers:
Uganda, Congo and the Mano River

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Introduction: Big Prize, High Stakes, Violent Conflict

Recent decades have seen substantial parts of Central and West Africa plagued by civil war. Attempts to explain these wars commonly stress the problem of state recession, combined with the emergence of warlords and warlordism (see Thomas, Kiser and Casebeer 2005; Lezhnev 2005; Green and Ward 2004; MacKinlay 2002; Rashid 2001; Shawcross 2000; Rich 1999; Reno 1998). Less examined is the behaviour and actions of the non-state armed groups fighting these conflicts, and how these may or may not change over time.[1]

Why do movements that began as a social – albeit violent – rebellion against an authoritarian and deeply corrupted state end up as a perverted mirror-image of the state they originally set out to destroy? Greed and increased access to resources provide one explanation for

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[1] Two exceptions are Clapham (1998) and Bøås and Dunn (2007).

the mutability of armed groups' behaviour over time (Keen 2000). A greed-based approach may capture insurgencies' increasing reliance on resource extraction and marketing over the life of the conflict. However, the profit motive itself does not explain why or to what extent groups turn away from their original political agendas – and why they end up replicating certain pathologies of the state they contest. A different approach is therefore needed.

Thus, I will argue that the process by which insurgency groups forsake political agendas to become profit-seeking entities may best be understood using a dual analysis. The first aspect of this analysis is to contextualise the insurgency with regard to the pre-conflict levels of structural and actual violence in society. In this regard, I echo Richards' (2005a:1) contention that the violent character of these movements needs 'to be understood in relation to patterns of violence already embedded in society'. The second aspect builds on the first. In centres on the question: Did the state structures place insurgencies in the affected country on a path-dependent track to a violent profit seeking warlordism. To what extent are these structures, and this path, common throughout West and Central Africa?

The second element of the analysis thus reflects my conviction (see also Bøås and Dunn 2007) that 'just because these guerrillas act within local social, economic and historical contexts does not mean that their trajectories are entirely unique'. Certain commonalities are shared across space. These are grounded in meta-narratives that reflect and expound collective experiences of corruption, abuse of power and position, and poverty (see Bøås 2004). Thus, while the backdrop of unrelenting, systematic state recession and predation is similar to the conflicts of Central and West Africa, so too, to some degree, is the worldview of those fighting these conflicts. Shared perceptions and experiences of social and economic exclusion, disenfranchisement, and marginalisation inform this worldview. What we should strive to illuminate is whether, and the extent to which, movements that may have emerged from similar worldviews have similar paths; and whether these paths derive from and depend upon structural factors determined by the logic of a corrupted state that also encapsulated society.[2]

Our approach is therefore premised on the assumption that the actions of armed groups can be analysed systematically. Although some the movements at the forefront of these conflicts – such as the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) in Sierra Leone, the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in Northern Uganda, the Mayi-Mayi in Eastern Congo, or the many factions in the Liberian civil war – seemingly bear little resem-

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[2] Will Reno's (1995, 1998, 2000) concept of the 'shadow state' in West and Central Africa is key in showing how shadow state structures come to characterise societies, as neopatrimonialism becomes the norm for socio-economic interaction between elites and counter-elites, as well as between people of all classes and strata of society.

blance to established political science typologies of insurgency movements, this does not mean that they violence they wreak is irrational.

The state, violence and insurgency

If we accept that there is a relationship between pre-war structures and the character of the armed insurgency, we must ask: what kind of social norms are internalised, and what kind of mind-sets and cosmologies developed, under such circumstances as those described above? This brings back in the first dimension of analysis depicted above. Both the Mano River states, Northern Uganda and Eastern Congo are productive sites for this exercise; below we first focus on the former, mainly on Sierra Leone, before turning to the cases of Northern Uganda and Eastern Congo.

Sierra Leone

According to Fithen and Richards (2005:123), 'the RUF represents a paradox. It claimed to have an ambition for a more just society, and yet ended up as a random ad arbitrary killing machine', seeking whatever profit could be gained for its members. A closer look at pre-war societal conditions in Sierra Leone war zones may give us further insight into whether this was bound to happen, and to what degree the evolution of the RUF was linked to the state structures that movement was initially established to resist and reform through armed revolution.

The history of governance and management in Sierra Leone is characterised by corruption, mismanagement, and neglect, which eventually led to complete state decay and civil war. The majority of Sierra Leoneans were (and remain) poor and unable to access services typically associated with the public sector, such as education – even where those services existed. Political and economic disenfranchisement and marginalisation were common to both urban and rural areas. Kono District, the historical centre of diamond mining in Sierra Leone, is particularly illustrative as to the relationship between the structural and the social.

Diamonds were discovered in Kono District in the 1930s. Already by the end of this decade, Sierra Leone's main export commodities were diamonds, iron ore, bauxite and rutile, illustrating a rapid shift from dependence on forest products (e.g. palm oil, coffee and cocoa) to a mineral economy. Control of diamond mining has always been vested in the wealthy, power and/or connected, notwithstanding the fact that the mining itself was typically done by poor young men.[3] Indeed, a brief

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[3] For a description of the living conditions of diamond miners in Kono District, see Bøås and Hatløy (2006). They also describe the ways in which production is organised at alluvial diamond mining sites, so as to reduce or eliminate the ability of individual miners to keep for themselves any diamond they discover. Young miners are also discouraged from attempting to keep and market 'their' diamonds because they generally lack the contacts and knowledge necessary to sell the diamond at an advantageous price; and because they know that they would be vigorously pursued and punished were such activities to be discovered.

sketch of the diamond mining industry in Kono shows both the systematisation of corruption and clientelistic relationships – between both young miners and local chiefs and local chiefs and the centre of power in the country – and how issues of autochthony and exclusion were integral to the functioning and control of a diamond-based patrimonial economy.

For the most part of the period prior to independence (from 1935 to 1956), Sierra Leoneans were legally prohibited from mining their own diamonds (Keen 2005). A British company, the Sierra Leone Selection Trust (SLST), had exclusive mining rights. To avoid illicit mining, SLST demanded the removal of those not considered autochthonous to the diamond regions. The colonial administration gave paramount chiefs the responsibility to control settlement in, and migration to those areas, and thereby also the power to decide who belonged to the 'soil' of the diamond-producing regions (and who did not). Nevertheless, significant migration into diamond mining areas continued in the 1950s, and many managed to circumvent the SLST monopoly through bribery or the establishment of patron-client relationships to local chiefs. This was the beginning of what Reno (1995) later termed the 'shadow state' structure in Sierra Leone.

The loss of formal control over the diamond areas, already underway during the last stage of colonialism, further continued after independence in 1961. When Siaka Stevens came to power in 1968, attempts were made to re-impose government control over the diamond areas, by sending the army to support the police in their attempt to halt illicit mining. This ultimately resulted not in a decrease in illicit mining, but the expansion and entrenchment of a culture of corruption, as both police and army personnel accepted bribes from miners lacking the necessary permits. By the late 1980s, some estimates say, up to 95 percent of the diamonds produced in Sierra Leone were smuggled out of the country (Sesay 1993; Keen 2005).

When Joseph Momoh assumed power in January 1986, he was pressured by the World Bank and the IMF to control and curb the smuggling. In 1987, the army was yet again sent into the diamond-producing regions. Rather than improve the situation, this resulted in the widening of the co-operation and co-optation between mining interests and the army, similar to that which unfolded during Stevens' attempt to re-regulate the sector in the late 1960s. Although the purported reform operation was ineffective, the army's expulsion of about 10,000 miners from Kono created a huge pool of discontented young ex-miners. This population later came to constitute the main recruitment pool for the RUF, the army and the Civil Defence Forces (CDF) during the civil war (see Abdullah 1998; Richards 1996; Reno 1998; Fithen 1999).

Thus, as the state lost formal control over its diamond resources, diamonds became the cornerstone of a culture of corruption and misman-

agement of national resources for the personal enrichment and benefit of political and economic elites, the armed forces and foreign interests. Meanwhile, the general public and most of the miners themselves remained in a situation of poverty and vulnerability (Bøås and Hatløy 2006; Reno 2003). Migrant miners' circumstances may have been especially precarious, as they were double outsiders: outside the economic and political channels through which spoils were claimed and distributed; and outsiders or 'strangers' (Reno 2003) to the diamond areas, and thus dependent on the 'goodwill' of local chiefs to carry out their activities (this goodwill typically the result of purchase through a protection rackets). These miners may also have been unprepared for the difficulty of mining life, and disillusioned by their inability to realise their hope of finding the big diamond that would secure their future comfort. Even if they did strike it rich, their share of the spoils would likely be limited, indeed.

This state of affairs was not lost on people like the infamous RUF warlord, Sam 'Maskita' Bockarie, who grew up in Kono during this period. When killed in early May 2003, Bockarie was generally regarded as one of the most dangerous men in West Africa: rebel, bandit, but also a regional powerbroker whose actions could threaten the stability of the whole West Africa region. Yet his background was utterly ordinary. Born in 1964, the son of a diamond miner, Bockarie grew up in Koidu town in Kono. He left school at an early age to become a diamond miner – a typical fate in a country with high school fees, and where families are poor and depend on the income that children can provide – and worked at the bottom of the rung of the diamond mining hierarchy in Kono. As many others, Bockarie eventually left mining to earn this living by other means: first as professional disco dancer in Sierra Leone, and then as a hairdresser in Abidjan, where he met a group of RUF recruits and decided to try his luck with them instead. There is little special in 'Maskita's' background. In its seeming aimlessness and constraints, it is similar to many others who ended up as rebels or soldiers. It illustrates, however, that in countries like Sierra Leone, it is not only the state and its institutions that is damaged and broken by an increasingly dysfunctional system, but the inhabitants as well (Bøås 2007). Youth may be particularly susceptible to the deadening effects of exclusion from opportunities for advancement or change (De Boeck and Honwana 2005).

Is it therefore so strange that, in rebellion, and facing stronger resistance than perhaps anticipated, these movements retard to the same practices witnessed and experienced by the participants in their formative years? In so doing, corrupting their 'revolution' and mirroring the dysfunctional patrimonial state they originally had rebelled against. As Foday Sankoh, leader of the RUF said in 2000. 'They ask us why we mine diamonds. Why didn't they ask Jamil [Said Mohammed] or Shaki [Siaka Stevens] that when the APC [All Peoples Congress] was in

power? Yeah, we mine!... We are not going to give up diamonds or our guns to anybody' (cited in Reno 2003:59).[4]

Eastern Congo[5]

On the contrary to Sierra Leone who is currently at peace, the situation in Eastern Congo, and North Kivu in particular is still tense and uncertain. In the following parts, the North Kivu security predicament will be situated in the conflict-nexus between migration, land rights and identity issues, which if allowed to continue mean that North Kivu will remain a dangerous place not only for those who live there, but for the rest of DRC as well as neighbouring Rwanda and Uganda.

Loot and plunder have followed in the footsteps of this war as in any other war, but the underlying dimensions of the conflict cannot be sought in the simple 'greed and grievance' terms of Berdal and Malone (2000). The Congo crisis is neither an international conspiracy (Samset 2002; Braeckman 2003) nor a 'resource war' merely about pillage and plunder (ICG 2000; Berdal and Malone 2000). Its causes must be located in the complex web of uncertainties concerning citizenship and land rights questions that have become an integral part of people's livelihood in North Kivu. Thus, even groups like the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR) and Laurent Nkunda's National Congress for the Defence of the People (CNDP) should not be seen as 'invading' insurgencies that easily could be disposed by military measures, but as integral parts of the North Kivu security predicament. In this regard, I also take issue with traditional approaches to Africa insurgencies who tend to see their fighters as unruly youths, predisposed to criminal behaviour – loose molecules with little if any attachment to the society in which they operate (Abdullah 1998; Collier 2000; Mkandawire 2002). On the contrary, the levels of attachment and disattachment between insurgency groups and local populations are much more complex. The current relationship between fighters and civilians in North Kivu is embedded in the land rights and citizenship nexus of this area. Situations like this one cannot be analysed or understood by referring to the 'greed and grievance' debate or to international connections only. This is first and foremost an agrarian war (see also Richards 2005b). The economic agendas' literature may be useful in explaining how armed movements are sustained, but it tells us next to nothing about the relationship between such movements and the socio-cultural context in which they operate. In order to come to terms with this part of their operations we need to take into consideration the totality of political, cultural and historical factors (see Bøås and Dunn 2007). The conflict in North Kivu is deeply entrenched in history, and here as elsewhere in Africa, the past and the present are connected in complicated

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[4] Jamil Said Mohammed was a Sierra Leone-born Lebanese partner of Siaka Stevens, who took over the Government Diamond Office in the 1970s and, through this mechanism, controlled with Stevens a vast amount of diamond revenue. See Reno (2003).
[5] This section draws on Bøås (2008).

ways. The only way we can hope to understand the North Kivu security predicament is to consider how the current conflict is an integral part of the total history of this part of Congo. The case of the Mayi-Mayi illustrates this point.

The Mayi-Mayi has at times been presented as a nationalistic resistance movement, other times as a locally-oriented youth militia without any kind of political superstructure or motive, or as different local ethnic militias acting independently of each other. In effect, the Mayi-Mayi combines all three dimensions. They draw on a nationalist rhetoric, often bordering on the xenophobic, it is youthful in orientation, discourse and membership, but it is also involved in land-grabbing operations on behalf of the ethnic communities it has attachment to. This has been the case both in Rutshuru and Masisi. However, in order to understand both its own operations and agenda and its slippery relationship to FDLR we must acknowledge the degree to which the war and its divisions has discredited and destroyed most existing structures of authority, but also that these were not exactly solid prior to the war. The colonial project took little notice of the traditional organisation of Congolese society, and Mobutu's regime manipulated and reorganised traditional chiefdoms to secure loyalty and control (Mamdani 2001).

The current history of Mayi-Mayi started in North Kivu where from 1992 and onwards marginalised youth and educational dropouts began to establish groups of youth combatants that acted against every representation of modern political authority. Some the first Mayi-Mayi groups were based in central areas of Masisi and Walikali where they participated in the so-called 'inter-ethnic war' brought about by an attempt by autochthonous Hunde and Nyanga communities to displace all Rwandaphones from these areas before local elections were to take place, fearing that the Banyarwanda would become too influential due to numerical strength and that this would enable them to continue to keep land they no longer paid traditional tribute to Hunda and Nyanga chiefs for cultivating (see ICG 2003). Following in the footsteps of these initial groups many more were formed during the two Congo wars so that today Mayi-Mayi has become a generic term for all militias in Eastern Congo with some form of relationship to autochthonous authority and tradition.

Even if the Mayi-Mayi as a social phenomenon is embedded in traditional practices and local historical contexts, its relationship to traditional structures of authority is ambiguous at best. There is often intimate contact, but traditional chiefs are not in total control of them as the formation of militias in North Kivu also offered the young men the possibility to challenge age-based authority. It is in this process we not only see how violence leads to a shift in influence to the advantage of those able to master it, but also the slippery relationship between the Mayi-Mayi and the FDLR. Several Mayi-Mayi leaders have formed *ad hoc* alliances with FDLR units, some based on the calculations that 'my en-

emy's enemy is my friend'; e.g. their common goal to fight perceived Tutsi rule and influence, but some of these relationships are also constructed on shared experiences of enclave formation as armed social units try to differentiate themselves from the social structures of the world by offering an alternative to the existing social and political order (or lack of such). This seems particularly to be the case of the Mayi-Mayi-FDLR relationships that developed between the units operating in Virunga Park, where the relative isolation of the groups from other communities may have forced them into an initial co-habitee relationship that first may have been purely practical, but that later became cemented on shared narratives of marginalisation, neglect and nostalgia for a past that seemed beyond redemption.[6]

Northern Uganda

The history of war in Northern Uganda is long and complicated, and its root causes are embedded in Uganda's troubled past (see Allen 1991; Behrend 1999; Doom and Vlassenroot 1999; Bøås 2004; Finnström 2008). The official starting point, however, is resistance in Northern Uganda to the overthrow of the Government of Tito Okello Lutwa by Museveni's National Resistance Army (NRA) in 1986. Since then the war has undergone several transformations (see Bøås 2004; Branch 2005), but it has almost exclusively been confined to the Acholi region – i.e. Amuru, Gulu, Kitgum and Pader, and to a lesser extent Oyam and parts of Lira in the Lango subregion.[7] The war itself is characterised by cyclical violence followed with periods of relative calm (see Finnström 2008). Attacks on the civilian population by the LRA are frequent, involving theft and looting, and maiming, killings and the abduction, mostly of children, but also of adults. Nonetheless, the LRA is more than a group of crazy criminals. It is a product of Acholi society, and its relationship to state power as well as its internal divisions and contradictions.

When Museveni's NRA established itself in Northern Uganda in 1986, tension, conflict and acts of revenge between its soldiers and the Acholis were frequent. Many of the former had been fighting against Acholi soldiers when they fought for Obote's government in the brutal battles in the Luwero Triangle,[8] and now the NRA soldiers avenged themselves upon their former enemies by plundering, murdering, torturing and raping. Revenge was clearly part of the picture, but that does not in itself explain why a formerly well-disciplined army in the Luwero

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[6] See also Richards (2005c), Bøås (2004 and Bøås and Dunn (2007) for similar arguments about respectively the RUF in Sierra Leone and the LRA in Northern Uganda.

[7] The main exceptions are the LRA rear bases in Southern Sudan and currently in Eastern Congo.

[8] The Luwero Triangle is an area immediately to the northwest of Kampala, demarcated by the roads running north form Kampala towards Gulu and northwest from Kampala to Hoima. The Kafu River marks the shorter northern side. The battles referred to here are the ones that took place between 1982 and 1983.

Triangle suddenly started to rape, loot and murder the civilian population. Three overlapping explanations can, however, be identified.

First, the political leadership of the NRA did not march northwards with the army. This left the fighters alone in what for them was hostile territory, without guidance from the educated political leadership. Second, in this process the NRA was enlarged with fighters from other anti-Obote groups, namely the Federal Democratic Movement (FEDEMU) and the Uganda Freedom Movement (UFM). These groups were incorporated into the 35th Battalion of the NRA, which became notorious for gross human rights abuses in Northern Uganda. Third, in the national media, now controlled by NRA, the Acholis were characterised as 'brutal and primitive murderers' (Doom and Vlassenroot 1999; Behrend 1998). The Acholis did not start the war in the Luwero Triangle, nor did their elders approve of the atrocities committed there. Nevertheless, a good number of commanders in Obote II's army were Acholi and in popular discourse they were depicted as been responsible for atrocities committed in the Luwero Triangle during Museveni's bush war against the Obote II government. The actions of the NRA soldiers led many Acholis to believe that the new government planned to kill all their males. This fear became even more intense when Museveni's government ordered a general disarming of the Acholi, recalling two meta-narratives of betrayal deeply entrenched in Acholi identity:

1. the disarmament enforced by the colonial administration, and
2. Amin's murder of thousands of Acholi soldiers.

It was within this context of extreme internal and external threat that the *Holy Spirit Movement* and its successor, the LRA was established.
War in Northern Uganda is therefore a highly complex process of social transformation, involving and evolving around competing interpretations of identities and ideas based on perceptions of marginalisation. The LRA rebellion is clearly about profit-making, but it is also contextually embedded in much larger issues concerning the Acholi view of themselves and their place (or lack of such) in the Ugandan polity. The meta-narrative of betrayal that 'signs' movement such as the LRA into existence has become increasingly entrenched in Northern Uganda due to the response of the Ugandan army – its extrajudicial killings, irregular arrests, detention, torture, and not the least the forced displacement of about 1.3 million Acholis (see Bøås and Hatløy 2005; Bjørkhaug, Bøås, Hatløy and Jennings 2007). This does not mean that there are many Acholis who support Kony and the LRA – the few who do are mostly in the diaspora – but they do not trust the government either, and they have good reasons for not doing so. If this is not taken seriously in the current negotiations in Juba that are supposed to end the war, one may very well bury the foundation for a new conflict into the agreement to end the current one.

Some final remarks

There will be no development without security, and until sustainable solutions to the many conflicts on the African continent are identified and implemented, the quest, often externally imposed, will remain elusive.

Such solutions will appear only when the nature of these conflicts and the movements who fight them are recognised. Currently, both mainstream academia and its manifestations in policy interventions tend to be characterised by single-factor explanations that offer little possibility in this regard. The dominance of what can be called 'greed'-based approaches to African conflicts is a particular concern, as they tell us little about the true nature of conflict. Treating African guerrillas as devoid of any kind of political agenda, greed-based approaches present them as bandits. Such an interpretation significantly narrows the number of possible policy interventions: you can negotiate with armed rebels with a political agenda, but bandits are to be crushed by force. As the cases presented here has tried to illustrate, the motivations of insurgency groups are many, and as they inevitably are a product of the society they operate in, their relationship to it is also a complex mix of attachment as well as disattachment.

Suggested further readings

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