

ROUTLEDGE ADVANCES IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS
AND GLOBAL POLITICS

The Politics of Conflict Economies

Miners, merchants and warriors in the
African borderland

Morten Bøås



‘With a constant eye for the lives of the people who inhabit the borderlands, Morten Bøås brings to the reader the outcome of his longstanding experience of social practices that are constitutive of state- society interactions in conflict economies.’

*Professor Daniel Bach, Emile Durkheim Centre,
Sciences Po, Paris France*

‘In *The Politics of Conflict Economies*, Morten Bøås provides an insightful and provocative examination of the tumultuous emergence of conflict economies in African borderlands. Rejecting over-simplified economic arguments that recent conflicts have been caused by natural resource competition, Bøås shows the importance of social, historic, and political factors across numerous cases. Drawing upon a rich and diverse array of cases – from Liberia, Sierra Leone and Mali to the Democratic Republic of Congo and Uganda – Bøås expertly combines a theoretical sophistication and attention to the humanity of individual actors unmatched by most other scholars. *The Politics of Conflict Economies* is both an essential interrogation of modern African conflicts and an exemplar of ethnographic political economy.’

*Professor Kevin Dunn, Hobart and William Smith Colleges,
Geneva, USA*

‘This is a superb book and I will be urging colleagues and students to read it. It is intelligent, lucid and connects with pertinent questions on peace, conflict, displacement and the economic complexities that underpin and prolong wars in Africa and beyond. But most of all, this book is humane. It is people-centric in a way that so many academic books are not.’

Professor Roger Mac Ginty, University of Manchester, UK

The Politics of Conflict Economies

Conflict economies cannot be approached in isolation but must instead be contextualised socially and historically. These economies did not emerge in vacuum, but are part and parcel of the history of people and place.

This book explores the informal and illicit extraction and trade of minerals and other types of natural resources that takes place in the ‘borderlands’ during periods of conflict. This type of extraction and marketing, often referred to as ‘conflict trade’ depends on a weak state, and works alongside the structures of the state and its officials. The book emphasises that conflicts do not start as competition over natural resources and in turn suggests that the integration of the extraction and marketing of natural resources only starts once fighting is well under way. Bøås argues that although economic agendas are an integral part of African conflicts, the desire to accumulate is not the only motivation. Thus, in order to present a more comprehensive analysis of conflict we need to take into account political, cultural and historical factors, in addition to the economic dimensions of conflict.

This book will be of very strong interest to students and scholars of political economy, conflict studies, international relations and development.

Morten Bøås is Research Professor at the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI).

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Morten Bøås
Oslo, Norway
March 2014

List of abbreviations

| | |
|--------|---|
| ADC | Democratic Alliance of 23rd May for Change |
| ADF | Allied Democratic Forces |
| AFL | Armed Forces of Liberia |
| AFDL | Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo-Zaire |
| AFRC | Armed Forces Revolutionary Council |
| ALCOP | All Liberian Coalition Party |
| ALR | Army for the Liberation of Rwanda |
| ARLA | Revolutionary Army for the Liberation of Azawad |
| APC | All People's Congress |
| AQIM | Al-Qaeda in the Land of Maghreb |
| CAMP | Citizens' Army for Multiparty Politics |
| CDF | Civil Defence Forces |
| CNDP | National Congress for the Defence of the People |
| ECOMOG | Economic Community Ceasefire Monitoring Group |
| ECOWAS | Economic Community of West African States |
| FAR | Forces Armées Rwandaises |
| FARDC | Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of Congo |
| FDC | Forum for Democratic Change |
| FDLR | Forces Démocratiques de Libération du Rwanda |
| FEDEMU | Federal Democratic Movement |
| FIAA | Islamic Arab Front of Azawad |
| FLGO | Libération du Grand Ouest |
| FPI | Front Populaire Ivoirien |
| FPLA | Front for the Liberation of Azawad |
| FRF | Forces Républicaines Fédéralistes |
| GIA | Armed Islamic Group |
| GoL | Government of Liberia |
| GSPC | Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat |
| ICC | International Criminal Court |
| LDF | Lofa Defence Force |
| LFF | Liberian Frontier Force |
| LRA | Lord's Resistance Army |

xiv *List of abbreviations*

| | |
|---------|--|
| LPC | Liberian Peace Council |
| LURD | Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy |
| MFUA | United Movements and Fronts of Azawad |
| MLC | Movement for the Liberation of Congo |
| MNJ | Niger Justice Movement |
| MNLA | National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad |
| MINUSMA | United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali |
| MODEL | Movement for Democracy in Liberia |
| MONUSCO | UN Stabilising Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo |
| MPCI | Mouvement Patriotique de la Côte d'Ivoire |
| MPJ | Mouvement Pour la Justice et la Paix |
| MRC | Congolese Revolutionary Movement |
| NALU | National Movement for the Liberation of Uganda |
| NPFL | National Patriotic Front of Liberia |
| NPRC | National Provisional Ruling Council |
| NRM | National Resistance Movement |
| NTGL | National Transitional Government of Liberia |
| PARECO | Coalition des Patriotes Congolais résistants |
| PRC | People's Redemption Council |
| RCD | Rassemblement Congolaise pour la Démocratie |
| RPF | Rwandan Patriotic Front |
| RUD | Rally for Unity and Democracy |
| RUF | Revolutionary United Front |
| SLPP | Sierra Leone People's Party |
| SPLA | Sudanese People's Liberation Army |
| TWP | True Whig Party |
| UFM | Uganda Freedom Movement |
| ULIMO | United Liberian Movement for Democracy |
| ULIMO-J | United Liberian Movement for Democracy-Johnson |
| ULIMO-K | United Liberian Movement for Democracy-Kromah |
| UMSC | Ugandan Muslim Supreme Council |
| UNAMSIL | United Nation's Mission in Sierra Leone |
| UNDP | United Nations Development Programme |
| UNHCR | United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees |
| UNLA | Ugandan National Liberation Army |
| UNMIL | United Nation's Mission in Liberia |
| UNRF | Uganda National Rescue Front |
| UPA | Uganda People's Army |
| UPC | Union of Patriotic Congolese |
| UPDA | Uganda People's Democratic Army |
| UPDF | Ugandan People's Defence Force |
| WFP | World Food Programme |
| WNBF | West Nile Bank Liberation Front |

Prologue:

Nakivale 1:05 AM

It's too late in the night and I need to get some sleep before a new day dawns on me. Another day with interviews, conversations and observations in Nakivale Refugee Settlement: another day of stories about violence and abuse (real as well as made-up for an audience), and fear, alienation, marginalisation and poverty, but also expressions of deep humanity in the midst of the volatile and confused environment that this huge refugee settlement in southwestern Uganda is. As I finish what remained in a bottle of red wine that a shop keeper had convinced me to buy the other day, claiming it was newly arrived high quality South African wine, my thoughts returned to a young Sierra Leonean boy called Kaka that lived on his own in a diamond-mining district and some of the other people with similar lives that I had met over the last decades and how and in what way it would be possible to write about them within an academic frame, but still making them and their lives present in the text; whether it would be possible to write in such a way that even readers from a distance could gain some understanding about these people and the often desperate measures that they attempt to apply to receive at very least some minimal control of their lives and livelihoods.

This is therefore a book about people. It is, however, also a book about parts of Africa – an Africa of the hinterlands, of the forgotten and the forlorn, about places of marginality, but also of importance – to the people who dwell there, but also, I believe, to us. It is a book about war, conflict and violence and about the economies that exist in such places. It is therefore a book about political economy, but contrary to what is usually presented under this heading it is not much concerned with global flows or structural constraints and conditions, but with people – people who desperately try to carve out a livelihood in the diamond fields of Sierra Leone, the war zones of Eastern Congo, the northern hinterlands of Liberia, the Sahel and the Northern Malian border zone, and in the camps for refugees and internally displaced in Central Africa.

When social scientists reflect on these situations it is most commonly through the frames of power, patronage, patrimonialism, and concepts of marginalisation, vulnerability and poverty. These frames are undoubtedly important, but that night in Nakivale as my sleep-deprived mind was merging images of Kaka (the young boy living on his own in the diamond fields in

Sierra Leone), with the picture I once took of a young girl separated from her mother along a dirt road just outside of Goma in Eastern Congo as people were running away from the advances of Laurent Nkunda's rebels to the soundtrack in my mind of Joy Division, I realised that first and foremost what people strive for in these violent and turbulent borderlands is control. The control of one's life that may empower an attempt to escape at least temporally what Henrik Vigh (2006) calls 'social death': the inability to live a worthy life. What we need to come to terms with is therefore the often desperate and sometimes violent strategies that people embark upon to attempt to achieve at the very least some nominal control of their lifeworld, because without this you are lost in a motionless void almost permanently: in a social limbo where you are nothing and end up as nothing. This is therefore a book about 'attempts at achieving this degree of control' of life and livelihood and the desperate and sometimes also undeniable violent measures that people will make use of.

The point about 'social death' is not that it directly and by necessity leads to death, but that people trapped in this 'status' for the lack of a better word are not becoming either. What 'social death' constitutes is therefore a life of living and not death in absolute terms. However, as such a life is not a full life, its consequences are despair and desperation, and thereby also a desire to make use of any means possible to connect to another social terrain. 'Attempting control' as navigating from social death therefore refers to immediate survival tactics as well as the possibility of accessing new trajectories and thereby new life possibilities and chances. The measures undertaken may be peaceful, but may also contain connotations of violence (symbolic and manifest) and be attempted to be carried out individually or collectively.

I have come across the deepest acts of humanity in my excursions in African borderlands, but these places are also undeniably volatile and dangerous. Violence is, of course, for good reasons seen as ugly, bad and destructive – as a negation of human possibilities. This is correct, but also to a certain extent wrong. Violence is an integral part of the human condition: it is first and foremost about control. We cannot imagine human interaction and society without, at least, some minimal degree of control – control of the demarcation of something founded on power, hierarchy and the potential for the use of force (e.g. violence). The basic point is that the whole human condition is based on some sort of demarcation – inherently violent in character, if not always manifest.

Every social unit known in mankind's history is based on lines of demarcation between in-groups and out-groups – between 'us' and 'them': another, an immigrant, an intruder, an enemy. This is something we all have in common whether we live in violent African borderlands or the world's comfort zones in Europe or North America. The establishment of such lines of demarcation and their interactions with respective 'others' therefore always include some dimensions of violence (latent or manifest). It is indeed something that we all have in common, but it is also played out very differently in different parts of the

world. Lifeworlds may therefore in their very essence not differ that much as any life depends on a combination of chance and opportunity for social and economic becoming, and we all live our lives along multiple paths of transition rather than along a single path of a predefined set of stages. Most likely, the smallest decisions, the ones we never really understood that we made bear a much larger impact on the transitions in our lives than the ones we define as our moments of watershed. This, I believe is true for people as well as for social organisations. However, it is also obvious that the cards in this world are extremely unevenly dealt as the number of possibilities and chances varies immensely from one place to another.

The line that separates my own society (Norway) from a place like North Kivu in the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) may be thinner than most of us like to think about, but it does exist. The main difference is the ‘routinisation’ of human interaction based on horizontal linkages of formal and informal institutions that enables the privileged of this world to wake up every morning to a new day where we can expect to face opportunities as well as challenges within an easily recognised frame of institutionalised societal norms that most members of our society accept without too much questioning. The result is a relatively hassle free society where people wake up, go to work and can expect to return in the same way in the evening with food on the table. This kind of regularised well-being is not what the majority of the inhabitants of the parts of Africa that this book deals with can expect. Their life is much more *ad hoc*, shorter and unfortunately also brutal. Their political, but also personal cartographies read as histories of violence in which they take part, some only nominally others in more key roles, but they all take part as there are few if any other alternatives present.

Let me here only briefly illustrate this point. The armed non-state actors in North Kivu, Eastern Congo, are most commonly seen as collective actors that use violence first and foremost to control and extract minerals. However, as none of these groups actually controls any of the most important mining sites, I would suggest that the underlying motivations of these movements are best understood through an analysis of the different strategies they apply to achieve order and social control. North Kivu is a violent borderland, but it is not an area completely without governance.

Such a practice perspective will illuminate the different ways in which these movements communicate with their respective ‘electorates’ and how they attempt to embed their cosmologies of the causes of war and the prospects for peace into not only these communities, but also to the groups defined as their enemies. In Chapter 2 where we return to Eastern Congo an attempt is therefore made to show how certain armed non-state actors in the North Kivu warscape attempted to create an order for operation, survival and navigation among populations they claimed to protect and support, but nonetheless also preyed upon, thus exposing the ambiguous levels of attachment and disattachment that exist in this part of Central Africa between armed non-state actors and civilian populations, and the space for social navigation and engineering that