Introduction

Central Africa is said to be in constant "crisis." Countries in the Great Lakes region only recently have started to recover from a decade of violent warfare, and new conflicts have already erupted in South Sudan and the Central African Republic. Such cyclical violence has strongly influenced the way we talk about these conflicts. For the past twenty years now in this region, news headlines depict a pattern of recurrent violence associated with deepening state collapse, identity struggles, and (global and local) economic predation. Almost invariably as well, these same conflicts are cast as complex political emergencies in need of urgent external intervention.

While acknowledging the crude violence associated with these conflicts, it remains unclear what exactly "emerges" from such political "crises," however. Beyond the loss of the old, postcolonial order, which new institutions and political constellations are actually forming in these challenging circumstances including apparent state withdrawal, international intervention, and globalized armed conflict? How are political order and authority reorganized beyond and sometimes in correlation with the dominant technologies of crisis and emergency management over the past twenty years in Central Africa? To reach beyond the many a priori interpretations of Africa's presumed crisis of modernity since the early 1990s (see Autesserre 2010), a new perspective is needed. Such a perspective simultaneously needs to adopt an analytical stance towards current notions of "crisis" and "emergency" (see also Roitman 2014), while providing space for

the subjective reorganization of political institutions that is taking place in the margins of regional power plays. This book provides a step in that direction. It engages in a long-term historiography of those actors who, through their daily practices, have learned to appropriate and transform the very conditions that make their lives so uncertain and unpredictable from the onset. This book enquires into the ways violent patterns of rule and accumulation perpetuate and accommodate novel challenges, not just today but across an entire generation. The liminal geographic perspective adopted in this study – which is written literally from the border – unveils not only how today's rule systems operate through hybrid identities and modes of governing, but also how political power beyond state sovereignty gets known and implemented across ever-widening distances and territories. Such rule systems, I will explain, are reproduced through the active transformation of dominant registers and conventions of government by members of society who are somehow marginal to central state power, people who have managed to occupy the widening interzone between receding states and expanding markets in this conflict-ridden part of sub-Saharan Africa.[1] Because of their brokering function among different social spaces and modes of governing, they have significantly reshaped regional geographies of rule, consisting, in part, of the growing linkages between state and nonstate (and global and local) forces in Eastern Congo's borderlands.

I need to clarify that this is not a book about war or politics writ small. This manuscript rather explores how people's response to violent uncertainty influences processes of political decision making and sovereign rule *in the long run*. My case study, situated on the border between Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC),[2] concerns an area whose inhabitants have faced numerous important

[1] In this book I employ a strictly anthropological definition of the term "liminality" as a threshold that enables new institutions and customs to become established. Liminality indicates not only a change of status through specific passage rites but also the inherent questioning of established conventions about structuring identity, time, space, and community, which takes place as a result of the removal of previously taken-for-granted forms and limits (Szakolczai 2009: 141–8; Thomassen 2009; van Gennep 1960; Turner 1974).

[2] I use the terms "Democratic Republic of Congo," "DRC," and "(DR) Congo" interchangeably, unless it concerns the period 1965–96, when the country was officially called Zaire.

challenges in this respect, both during and after colonial rule. The protagonists of this book are a group of Nande traders who gradually moved from being situated at the *margins* of the law (MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga 2000) to being the central bearers of local sovereignty. Throughout this study, I will show how the responses of these entrepreneurs to solve an apparently *private* problem – to generate profit and to protect themselves and their property from detriment – generated a number of important *public* outcomes, including a radical transformation of state government in this Central African borderland.

The Nande from North Kivu have formulated an original answer to the problem of political disorder that does not fit the textbook analyses of state "failure," "crisis," or "collapse." They are part of a liminal order, a frontier society (Kopytoff 1987) whose decentralized organisation has attracted interest from across the globe.[3] For many decades they maintained intensive relationships across East Africa and Asia as transnational tradesmen. During the 1970s and 1980s they stood at the forefront of a booming cross-border economy in Africa's Great Lakes region. During the 1990s, they adroitly bent rebel occupation

[3] Nande (sing. Munande, plur. Banande) literally means "fugitives," a pejorative term invented by the arabized slave raiders who penetrated the Rwenzori Mountain area around the turn of the twentieth century. Their autodefinition is Bayira, which in their own (Kinande) language means "my people." After their partition from the Kitara kingdom in the seventeenth century (in contemporary Uganda), the Bayira became divided between the Bakonzo (currently located in Uganda's Bundibugyo and Kasese districts), the Banyisanza, Bashu, Baswagha, Batangi, and Bamate chiefdoms in the Semliki valley and Rwenzori Mountain area (currently in the DRC's North Kivu province). In the DRC these different subclans today are called "*chefferies*." One striking aspect of the Nande's political organisation is the lack of a central authority (as I will explain, the notion of a single chiefdom is rather an effect of colonial occupation; see Chapter 2 in this volume). The Nande are commonly designated as an "anarchic" group whose competing claims to ritual authority contain the seeds of the group's own fragmentation (Bergmans 1970: 23; Packard 1987; Remotti 1993). Nande sovereignty rather finds its expression in the institution of "*obwami*," which involves the symbolic right over the land through a guarantee of ecological stability (which, in the case of natural hazard, becomes highly contested in the case of the Bashu: Packard 1987). The *mwami*'s power is furthermore contested in the inherent institution of the "*mughula*," who has the exceptional right to declare the mwami's death and re-institution (quite symbolically, the "*mughula*" resides in a hill overlooking the village). Packard (1987: 143) concludes: "Though the present society is culturally quite homogenous, each of the constituent ethnic strands continues to recognize its different origins and sees its political status vis-à-vis the others in terms of it."

to their advantage. During the postwar transition (2003–06), their penetration of government structures deeply influenced the prospects of local democratic rule in the Congo–Uganda borderland. Concerned with the problem of economic uncertainty, these cross-border businessmen gradually became the active brokers of a liberal form of self-rule (or *auto-prise-en-charge* as they call it), which, as an ensemble of governing techniques, has further facilitated the expansion of violent capitalism in this part of Eastern Central Africa.

In a way, this book offers a different way to look at the ongoing political "crisis" in Africa's Great Lakes region. Through the lens of these cross-border traders, it describes the region's recent history not as a rupture or failure. It rather describes today's situation as sequence in a longer process of profound social and cultural change, which occurs *as a result* of people's structured response to daily survival and government challenges and not despite of it (Greenhouse 2002). Moving away from avant-guardist policy recommendations, it tries to boil down the debate about crisis and critique to questions of everyday decision making and of the challenges involved when trying to predict and assess uncertain conditions, in short, by engaging in an ethnography of critical life worlds.

This introduction is meant to explore some of the ongoing debates about Africa's presumed social and political crisis from the perspective of those who live through it day by day. After a short overview of the debates about Central Africa's presumed descent from the modern path of development, I will pay considerable attention to what I call the economy-in-war: modes of risk valuation that operate beyond presumably rational calculations of loss and gain. Finally, a chapter overview will give oversight of the arguments developed in the rest of the book.

Collapse or Order?

When considering Africa as a crisis-stricken continent, the Great Lakes region stands out as a metaphorical example. For decades, if not centuries, nothing positive appears to have emerged from this region, apart from the gold and the minerals appearing in our computers and cell phones. In common talk, politics in the Great Lakes region predominantly gets depicted through notions of intrigue, plunder, and moral

breakdown. A good indication of this trend is the analysis of national political systems. The Congolese state, for example, during the past five decades has been consecutively described as a fragmented state; an absolutist autocracy and a Bonapartist political system; a lame Leviathan; a dinosaur; a failure; a collapsed, disintegrated, or corrupted state; a façade dwarfed by citizens' active engagement in private accumulation; and "a forsaken black hole characterized by calamity, chaos, confusion" (Trefon 2004: 2).[4] Describing politics merely in terms of collapse and pathologies cannot be the aim of profound scientific analysis (Hagmann and Hoehne 2008), however, especially since none of these epithets sufficiently captures the radically destabilizing experience Congo's populations have lived through over the past twenty years. Rather, the radical reconfiguration of social norms people engage in their everyday lives requires us to redefine the dominant political science paradigms by which African states, and the DRC in particular, are currently depicted (see also Dunn 2004). Where states collapse, Doornbos writes, new situations may arise, novel arrangements may emerge to deal with political accountability and control, and new ways to regulate social and economic interaction may subsist (Doornbos 2002). In this sense, it is useful to reiterate Michael Bratton's aptly observed statement twenty-five years ago: that it is indeed one thing to note people's creativity to deal with apparent disorder and calamity in the face of official state withdrawal in some domains, but it is quite another to ascertain "alternative orders" emerging from such creative responses (Bratton 1989: 430).

What *do* the dynamic social forces and ways of getting by in the apparent absence of national state monopolies actually mean in terms of reproducing political order, then, especially where African postcolonial states have been visibly limited in constructing it? This question has some wider significance when one considers the inherently

[4] For an overview on politics and violence in Africa's Great Lakes region see, for example, Lemarchand (1964), Young (1965), Zolberg (1966), Willame (1972), Callaghy (1984, 1987, 2001), Schatzberg (1988), MacGaffey (1991), McNulty (1999), Breytenbach, Chilemba, Brown, and Plantive (1999), Lemarchand (1997, 2001, 2007), Dunn (2004), Braeckman (2003), Vlassenroot and Raeymaekers (2004b), Trefon (2005), Nest, Grignon, and Kisangani (2007), Turner (2007), Prunier (2009), Reyntjens (2010), and Stearns (2011).

constitutive role armed conflict and informal cross-border economic exchange have come to play in Central Africa's recent political history. Since the mid-1990s, Congo, Rwanda, Burundi, and Uganda have known periods of serious political turmoil. The Congolese conflict exceeds its neighbours not only in numbers of victims but also in the number of countries involved. From 1998 until 2003, nine African nations and over 20 armed groups became involved in Africa's deadliest armed conflict. Besides massive population displacements and starvation, these cross-border alliances between militias and neighbouring militaries also generated the emergence of alternative systems of "power, profit and protection" (Ballentine and Sherman 2003) in Eastern Congo's different rebel fiefdoms, which transformed regional power geographies in dramatic ways (Callaghy, Kassimir, and Latham 2001). One example of this trend has been the conflict in Ituri, where the combination of militia violence, foreign military involvement, international markets, and intervention campaigns has realigned regional power interests in interesting and challenging ways (Vlassenroot and Raeymaekers 2004b; Titeca and De Herdt 2010; Veit 2011). Some say these growing cross-border alignments indicate a growing trend in Central Africa's political landscape towards a decentralized form of "Big Men" rule on the margins of fragmentary state performance (Garrett, Sergiou, and Vlassenroot 2009; Raeymaekers 2012b; Verweijen 2013).

Given the complexity of regional conflict dynamics, the overall purpose of this book will be to find ways of describing the inherent transformation of systems of rule emerging from the current era but without using the narrow conception of a complex emergency. In the context of Central Africa's recurrent armed conflicts, this objective involves two further challenges: one has to do with practical (humanitarian) and the other with analytical frames. In Central Africa today, intervening agencies [humanitarian nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) and development and international organisations] are still primarily preoccupied with the reasons why people are dying rather than enquiring about their modes of life. While some of their aims are laudable in and of themselves, the inherent consequence of this (dominant) humanitarian perspective is that the Congolese people and their everyday lives remain completely peripheral to concerns about post- and anticrisis in the DRC today: at most, inhabitants of violent environments are being

depicted as passive victims and pawns in the hands of overarching political struggles, which they do not grasp and do not actively affect (see also Autesserre 2010). In the midst of these ongoing emergencies, surprisingly few questions arise about Congolese *agency*, however: how people subjectively evaluate the situations they live through every day, how they react to them in the immediate and medium term, and how they proactively formulate and implement decisions to avert calamity, produce a livelihood, and avoid physical harm. In short, how do they *know* and appropriate the crisis (Roitman 2014: 10)? This book partly tries to redress that gap in understanding.

The second challenge concerns the ambiguous nature of crisis itself: the difficulty of determining which responses people formulate are merely ephemeral, haphazard coping mechanisms and which ones acquire a more permanent character as regulating institutions but also the difficulty of reasoning outside its categorical impositions. An often-heard critique from so-called empiricists is that the current context is simply too volatile to be able to make sense of through comparison, analytical reference, and theoretical reflection. I think this not only untrue, but such criticisms also defy the persistence of social and cultural institutions that find their inspiration in the multifaceted responses Central Africans themselves formulate to solve their problems. Too often, such multiplicity has given way in academic debate to univocal wish lists of how African polities *should* look rather than what they represent in terms of the possibilities for making one's life. One only needs to note the debate about the supposed withdrawal of African citizens from the state during the 1970s and 1980s, a debate that was full of presuppositions about the liberal self-reliance that would hopefully emerge from these apparent attempts to "beat the system" (Azarya and Chazan 1987: 121; see also Hart 1973; MacGaffey 1983, 1987). Similarly, the terminology of "hybrid governance" (Boege, Brown, Clements, and Nolan 2008) that is so actively promoted in postwar recovery policy today bears a great resemblance to this antistate epistemology: the "*régime du simulacre*" Bayart, Ellis, and Hibou (1999) and Mbembe (2001) for years have associated with the state in Africa and which is presumably kept alive in its artificial form through unending conflicts over legitimacy, material obligations, and elite privileges. Systematically evoking the "twilight" character of institutions that claim to defy the state in Africa (Hecht and Simone

1994; Lund 2006), current theories emphasize quite uniformly the heterogeneous polities which apparently emerge in the interstices of rational-legal and social norms of practice (Olivier de Sardan 2008). Such heterogenous states, according to De Sousa Santos (2006: 43–4), are characterized by the uncontrolled coexistence of starkly different political cultures and regulatory logics in different sectors and at different scales and, in extreme cases, may even lead to the formation of multiple microstates existing inside the same state. Paraphrasing Sally Falk Moore (1978), Christian Lund refers to this heterogeneity as an ambiguous space, characterized by institutions that continue to "sap the state from its vital resources, but simultaneously depend on it for their own existence" (Lund 2006: 688–9).

This notion of citizen disengagement from the state (whether heteogeneous or not) remains very much present today in depictions of so-called informal mechanisms of economic accumulation and exchange, which are believed to operate both besides and in resistance against corrupt state governments. In the DRC, this vision has been promoted through the work of Mukohia Vwakyanakazi (1982), who, in his doctoral study on Nande commerce in Butembo during the 1970s and 1980s, termed the latter "rebels against the state." In particular, Vwakyanakazi saw the roots of Nande enterprise in their capability of social adaptation: adapting their livelihoods to geographic remoteness and political marginality, Nande traders were able to formulate an alternative solution to their living conditions in the form of informal cross-border commerce. At the same time, he argued, the rising phenomenon of informal accumulation in Zaire was likely to persist because it essentially thrived on the social divisions that characterized this ostensibly peripheral marginal society. Like McGaffey, Vwakanaykazi remained deeply inspired by the work of Hernando De Soto and his argument about the silent revolution of informal capital. De Soto (1989, 2000) argued that economies characterized by predatory state presence sometimes succeed in accumulating considerable amounts of capital, but this capital is often dead because it is unprotected in a legal sense. This makes it difficult for businesses to obtain credit, trade, or expand. To cut through the exaggerated red tape and lack of legal protection, such "informal" businesses invent innovative strategies, but these are often fragile and unsustainable.

Following this line of argument, MacGaffey, who collaborated substantively with Vwakyanakazi, described the Nande's enterprises in the central city of Kisangani as a gigantic bootstrap operation, which directly undermined official state authority. Remarking on how "in an apparently impossible situation not only were people surviving, but some were doing very well for themselves," she pondered the idea that, "in the midst of irrationality and unpredictability some things [may] work in an organized and efficient way" (MacGaffey 1987: 1). Both authors have inspired numerous social scientists in Congo and abroad interested in the expansion of informal economies (see, for example, de Herdt and Marysse 1996; de Villers, Jewsiewicki, and Monnier 2002; Mirembe 2005; Kaparay 2006).

Depicting African answers to its development problems as a kind of active resistance, or a default space (Scott 1990), against the centralizing bureaucratic state have not been met with unconditional enthusiasm, however. Writing about the same period as Vwakyanakazi and MacGaffey, Prunier and Roitman, for example, have explicitly analysed the intricate political connections of economic cross-border exchange in Central Africa. Prunier's work on the Ugandan *magendo* economy offers an insight into the explicitly liminal nature of unofficial economic exchange patterns in African former colonies. In the late 1980s, Prunier writes, it was quite impossible to create neat categories of "official" and "illegal" trade in Uganda because the same companies, the same material resources, and the same people were often involved in both. More importantly, such activities could not continue to exist without a direct complicity between the official and unofficial spheres of action: in the Uganda of Idi Amin (1971–9) and Milton Obote (1966–71/1980–5), the combination of autocratic government and deep economic crisis forced many to actively cross such lines (Prunier 1983).

What formal and informal economic activities seem to have in common is not their supposed opposition in normative terms but the way they reconstitute the state in mutual relationship with each other. Writing about the triple borderland among Chad, Cameroun, and the Central African Republic, Roitman comes to a similar conclusion when she says that the relationship between state and nonstate realms in these transborder economies remains highly *ambiguous*: state officials and smugglers act reciprocally and in complicity inasmuch as they are

competitive and antagonistic with each other. Although informal economic agents usually contrast the state's regulatory authority regarding the payment of taxes or the maintenance of local security, for example, they remain complicit with each other insofar as state representatives depend on these nonstate forces for rents and the means of redistribution. In Central Africa, smuggling networks make important, and sometimes even essential, contributions to the national political economy in terms of unofficial taxation, local economic development, and the outsourcing of authority in a variety of domains. This means that border economies do not at all imply the state's demise in terms of local authority or accumulation possibilities but rather transform it in unexpected ways (Bennafla 1999, 2002; Roitman 2001, 2005). Though such critical observations pose important correctives to earlier naïveté about citizens' disengagement from the state, the view that informal economic activity represents some form of active resistance against the state has nonetheless remained a powerful one in African political science studies throughout the 1990s and 2000s (Meagher 2012).

Since the mid-1990s, another important determinant has accompanied the analysis of African "informal" economies and responses to underdevelopment in general: the resurgence of regional armed conflict. From a short attempt to invoke social grievances as a driving motive behind some of these conflicts (Richards 1996), the dominant paradigm to describe African wars nowadays seems to be that of a "continuation of economics by other means" (Keen 1998: 11; see also Reno 1998, 2002; Berdal and Malone 2000; Le Billon 2001; Ballentine and Sherman 2003; Keen 2012). The widespread observation that state militaries, armed groups, and "informal" enterprise are being mixed up in some kind of "military commercialism" (Dietrich 2000) has clearly shifted the lens towards more market-driven logics behind Africa's ongoing armed conflicts – a vision that becomes increasingly difficult to defy. Unfortunately, this dominant perspective has given way to a rather simplified imagery of economic motivations during warfare and which grossly runs over complementary social and cultural considerations (see, for example, Cramer 2002; Weinstein 2003; Korf 2006; Schlichte 2009; Keen 2012). Further stimulated by big-budget Hollywood productions like *Blood Diamond* and *Lord of War*, such "economistic" (Graeber 2001) explanations vividly reproduce the