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978-1-107-08207-6 - Violent Capitalism and Hybrid Identity in the Eastern Congo: Power to the Margins

Timothy Raeymaekers

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## Violent Capitalism and Hybrid Identity in the Eastern Congo

### *Power to the Margins*

This book suggests a radically new reading of Central Africa's violent crisis. Written from the vantage point of actors who stand in the middle of it – transnational cross-border traders – it traces back today's violent rule patterns to a tumultuous history of extraeconomic accumulation, armed rebellion, and de facto public authority operating in the margins of regional state powers.

Based on a decade of sociological research in the region, the originality of this book lies in its neat focus on cultural and economic uncertainty as a driver of political action. Exploring the profound social changes that have taken shape in this region over the past century, it explains how certain actors have taken a central place and how others are marginalized in the reformulation of political authority at the local and cross-border levels. Through an in-depth analysis of Eastern Congo's turbulent history, it offers new ways to think about the relationships between public authority, armed conflict, and international intervention.

Timothy Raeymaekers is Lecturer in Political Geography at the University of Zurich. He is coeditor of *Conflict and Social Transformation in Eastern DR Congo* (2004) and *Violence on the Margins: State, Conflict, and Borderlands* (2013) and has published numerous journal articles.

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TIMOTHY RAEYMAEKERS

*University of Zurich*



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32 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10013-2473, USA

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[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)

Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9781107082076](http://www.cambridge.org/9781107082076)

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First published 2014

Printed in the United States of America

*A catalog record for this publication is available from the British Library.*

*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data*

Raeymaekers, Timothy.

Violent capitalism and hybrid identity in the Eastern Congo / Timothy Raeymaekers.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-107-08207-6 (hardback)

1. Political violence – Congo (Democratic Republic) 2. Borderlands – Congo (Democratic Republic) 3. Capitalism – Congo (Democratic Republic) 4. Congo (Democratic Republic) – Economic conditions. I. Title.

DT658.26.R24 2014

967.5103'4–dc23 2014027886

ISBN 978-1-107-08207-6 Hardback

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*For Kakule and Samuel – for different reasons*

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## Preface

It's been twelve years now since I first set foot in Central Africa. Looking back, I remember periods of swinging enthusiasm, hard work, parties, friendship, laughter, emotion, anxiety, and despair, as well as outright depressing disillusion. Stepping out of a ramshackle propeller plane onto the airstrip of Butembo in January 2002, I faced my first test as a social scientist in Africa when an annoying customs agent – after unsuccessfully pressing my colleague and me for an exorbitant bribe – asked me to buy him a pomade for his hurting knee. My experience of arrival did not much differ (or was even worse, maybe) in early 2014 at a heavily militarized airport, this time in Beni. While a drunken policemen insisted on controlling my luggage with a broken metal detector, my nerves were put to the test even more, knowing that an army general had been killed two days earlier by a rocket launcher 5 km down the road towards my hotel. Patting the officer on the shoulder and saying *kesho, kesho* (tomorrow [we'll be back]), my Congolese colleagues drove me off in a cloud of warm and welcoming laughter.

I share my colleague Filip De Boeck's moment of honest reflexivity when he says that it is hard to brush aside a history of "heart of darkness" imagery while doing research in this part of the world (De Boeck and Plissart 2004: 15). Many conversations, images, and textual representations – including, consciously, this one – start by invoking such forlorn ghosts. In their daily practice, Congolese bureaucrats and political rulers appear to assist their constant reappearance

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(not surprisingly, Chapter 5 of this book talks about the resuscitation of Mobutu's ghost). Once such phantoms evaporate, though, as if they emerged from a dream, we as social scientists usually take a breath of relief and go on with our activities of ethnographic and sociological study of (also not easy to manage!) partly friendship/partly professional relations in the daily business of academic and expert consultancy work.

The aim of sociological analysis should not be to wave away such spectral realities like a smoke screen, as if they did not exist. Rather we should give them their place in this region's constructed history of constant "crisis" and "failure" and of cannibalistic, zombielike political structures (Mbembe 2001). This book makes the difficult exercise of trying to reach beyond the rationalization of such violent realities as moments of opposition or avoidance [see, for example, Azarya and Chazan (1987) or Scott (1998)]. Rather, it investigates how the oppressive presence of Congo's hybrid and ghostlike political structures is constantly reenacted as a result of the constant navigation (Vigh 2008, 2009), by people living in such violent contexts, of constantly shifting livelihood opportunities and structures of political engagement. To be able to do this, I invite the reader to consciously place her- or himself in the margins of regional power plays. Like the protagonists of this book, what I have come to adopt as my preferred place of reference is exactly this interstitial, liminal space that sits uncomfortably between the state and the nonstate, political opposition and marginality, economic opportunity and political protection, and hybrid global and local identities.

This preface is also meant as an acknowledgement to many people who have shared their experiences and insights on the way. First, I thank the editor and staff at Cambridge University Press, who have done an excellent job in streamlining the review and production process. Second, I thank my three anonymous reviewers, who helped me with constructive comments along the way (particularly reviewer number 2, who took the effort to read and comment on the manuscript a second time after resubmission). Third, I thank my Congolese interlocutors, who took the time to listen and talk to me, as well as my close colleagues in North Kivu, who shared and assisted me in my liminal endeavours during this whole period (particularly at the Université du Graben and the Université du Rwenzori). Fourth, I thank

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my colleagues and friends at the University of Ghent, particularly the Conflict Research Group, to whom I owe a great deal in terms of shared work and intellectual exchange. Fifth, I thank my more recent colleagues in the University of Zurich's Geography Department, in particular the Political Geography Unit, who have continued to enrich my professional experience in an atmosphere of constructive, amicable, intellectual dialogue. Sixth, I thank my friends at the *Cantieri Meticci*, with whom I learnt to appreciate and perform the bodily experience of liminality, even if sporadically (or should I say diasporically?). And, finally, I also thank the wider professional community of Africanist and social science scholars, including those in funded programmes like MICROCON (Micro-Analysis of Violent Conflict) and FAO (the UN Food and Agricultural Programme) and outside them, and in different professional associations (particularly the African Borderland Research Network, the Europe-Africa Group of Interdisciplinary Studies, and the American Association of Geographers); I also acknowledge solid, day-to-day conversation and seminar work with colleagues around the world.

Over the years I have benefited from grants and funding from various sources, including NOVIB-OXFAM, Broederlijk Delen, Kerkinactie, Ghent University, the United Nations (FAO), ABFLoyd, Amnesty International, the European Union (6th Framework Programme), Zurich University, FAFO, and the Swiss National Science Fund. Without these funds, and the free exchange with colleagues around the world, this book would have been impossible to research, let alone write. None of these people and organizations are responsible for the many errors and mistakes that undoubtedly will occur in this monograph. The interpretation of encounters and events described in this book is, of course, entirely my own. For matters of safety and anonymity, I have used pseudonyms for every directly quoted person in this book, unless I explicitly mention the contrary.

Part of this book has been published elsewhere previously, although in radically different form. Chapter 1 appeared in a different and shorter version in *Political Geography*, 28 (2009), pp. 55–5. Parts of Chapter 4 appeared in *Development and Change*, 41/4 (2010), pp. 563–87.