Militarized youths in western Côte d'Ivoire: local processes of mobilization, demobilization, and related humanitarian interventions (2002-2007)
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I slept twice with my shoes on, a small bag packed at the foot of my bed, ready to literally run away as fast as I could if armed men were to enter my home. The first time was in Bétou, Republic of Congo (RoC), a small and very isolated town on the Ubangui River, hidden within the deep forest that borders the Central African Republic (CAR) and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). That was in March 2003, right after a Coup had ousted the Patassé regime from the neighbouring Central African Republic. Mercenaries from the other Congo (DRC) had lent a hand in supporting the counter-insurgency, but they had been defeated and were therefore on their way home, looting everything they could as they passed through. When they showed up on the outskirts of Bétou carrying fridges and radios on their heads (Bétou was their first Congolese stop after their rout in Central Africa), there was tangible tension in town. Shops had closed early and any movement outside was literally suspended. The sous-Préfet welcomed the armed men right before they entered the town and promised them support (he was later heavily criticized for this). Despite its unconventional character, his mediation worked quite well. The bulk of the pirogues in Bétou were requisitioned that same night and the Congolese mercenaries immediately crossed the river to DRC; they were all gone by the next morning. Bétou was completely spared.

The second time I slept with my shoes on was a year later, in Abidjan, following the violent events of 25 March 2004, when so many people perceived as ‘political opponents’ were killed, injured, or went missing. The government had played a major role in these disturbing events. I was then staying in a rented house with no particular security safeguard besides an old Burkinabé and his wife (and myriad kids), who had been ‘guarding’ the house for several years and who actually were making their living by selling matches, Maggi cubes and batteries through a small hole dug in our cement fence. I was then particularly concerned by the anti-French discourse promoted by young mobs close to the Presidential party and massively relayed by the main media. It is curious how quickly terrible things run through your head. I think my main fear then was of being raped. Or being hurt ‘for fun’, ‘to set an example’, or for merely being white or French. Being ‘unfortunately’ killed was also a harrowing yet realistic threat that at the time seemed to me to lie within the range of possibilities. As I

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1 Pirogues are local canoes made from a hollowed tree trunk.
stayed inside for three days, keeping connected with a range of local contacts in the outside world by cell phone, I thought of the ICRC workers slaughtered in Eastern Congo in early 2001 (in Ituri), the abduction of a colleague of mine in the Ruzizi Plain the same year on 11 September (I was in the car behind), and I could not help wondering to myself what on earth I was doing there, far from my own home and exposed to events that were far beyond my control and that could affect my life in the worst ways.

Luckily, the person who would later become the father of my daughters was there both times; in terms of moral support and shared experience, this is definitely worth mentioning. And even more luckily, nothing happened. But the mere thought that it could have gone wrong is haunting. Maybe this is what triggered my interest in violent young African mobs. Or perhaps it was my father’s furtive involvement in the OAS\(^2\), when he was 18 and prone to being brainwashed, like many of his contemporaries. So when the opportunity arose to earn a living doing research and when a few doors opened in Côte d’Ivoire that made it possible to focus on armed groups, I jumped on the train and put my ‘humanitarian’ hat on hold. The journey lasted many years and took more than one turn.

\(^2\) OAS stands for Organisation de l’Armée Secrète and was a short-lived French nationalist underground organization during the Algerian War (1954-62). The OAS used armed struggle in an attempt to prevent Algeria’s independence.