Militarized youths in western Côte d'Ivoire: local processes of mobilization, demobilization, and related humanitarian interventions (2002-2007)

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Introducing the study

The recent conflict in Côte d’Ivoire has led to the militarization of many young civilians on both belligerent sides. While some participated in combat and fought on the front line when violence was at its peak (Fall 2002 – Spring 2003), others assumed more backstage functions, from the maintaining of military positions, when places were won from the enemy, to basic logistical duties. There are many tasks within an armed group, and low-ranking recruits usually navigate between those depending on conflict phases and individual skills. Where some youths were only militarized for a few months (at the onset of conflict), others have continued their involvement in armed movements over the years, after the main clashes were over, with some being particularly vocal about it. What is of particular interest is the fact that many of these youths have assumed a function of ‘commuting’ conscripts, alternating periods of semi-military work, where they had to report to some kind of warlike hierarchy, with periods at home where they were back to a quasi daily routine. This became particularly characteristic as the Ivorian war evolved into a situation of ‘no peace, no war’ with sporadic violence still occurring, but only at certain periods and within specific settings.

1 Multitasking is particularly characteristic of civilian recruits. Examples of activities included securing of particular places through the set-up of checkpoints, transmission of information between bases, registration of men and equipment going in and out military camps, collecting taxes from local economic operators, cleaning weapons, cooking, cleaning, sports (to stay in shape), and compulsory presence every morning at roll call, during the gathering of troops.
As the main theatre of violence, the west of the country has been particularly affected by the militarization of the civilian population. It has been chosen as terrain for this particular research. If the initial rationale behind arming the youths was most probably linked to self-defence in the case of counter-insurgent movements, and to the necessity to numerically strengthen the base of the rebellion in the case of the insurgents, those who belonged to these violent movements were generally quite negatively perceived by those who stayed outside these mobilization processes. In mainstream media and the dominant line of thinking in public opinion, there has been a strong inclination to amalgamate them with thugs and petty thieves and even if the picture has tended to be more nuanced at the local level, negative perceptions have tended to prevail: militarized youths in western Côte d’Ivoire have been socially and negatively marked, a paradox in many ways, since conscription has always been a necessary feature of civil wars, regardless of context. The way militarized civilians have been publicly framed in the country has fed the ‘loose molecule’ hypothesis popularized by Kaplan in the mid-1990s (Kaplan, 1994), where the stand is taken that the most likely profile of Ivorian low-ranking recruits is that of jobless, uneducated, and dissocialized youths with few alternative prospects other than to resort to violence to make ends meet. Despite having received a great deal of criticism (Guichaoua, 2007; Peters, 2004; Richards, 1996), this view continues to remain quite anchored in popular sociology and is still popular in certain circles of academics, donors and practitioners.

But surely, not every youth drawn into an armed group has turned bandit in western Côte d’Ivoire and this book pays particular attention to avoid such oversimplification. If it is likely that some recruits saw an easy way to earn their living by turning criminal and extorting civilians (by making use of their position of power and their relatively easy access to weapons), many did not take part in such activities and limited themselves to doing what was asked of them by their hierarchy (which often only meant – once the period of open war was over – filling a shift at a checkpoint every fortnight or so). The scapegoating of these youths has probably been convenient for strategic purposes, and by offering a plausible explanation to violent events may even have participated in fuelling existing tensions by triggering a certain propensity for retaliation. But such a perspective had the detrimental effect of masking important differences of characteristics across settings and between the different movements. Who joins armed groups, and why, eventually remain empirical questions whose answers vary considerably across contexts; so do processes of demobilization, and – within those – the place of humanitarian action aimed at facilitating a return to civilian life for this militarized population. The objective of this study is to shed light on these topics in the specific context of western Côte d’Ivoire, taking as

Research approach

This research explores – from the very particular perspectives of young civilians who were militarized for some time before receiving short-term reinsertion assistance – the different processes which led to their militarization and demilitarization. There has been no such study to date for western Côte d’Ivoire, despite the fact that the region has been home to most persisting non-State armed groups involved in the Ivoirian conflict and was the territory most affected by warfare. Yet notwithstanding this lack of empirical grounds, western armed groups have been a priori viewed in an extremely negative light with an overemphasis on their irrationality, violence and lumpen individuals. This book is a first-hand attempt to bring some nuance to the fore for this specific geographical area.

To examine the different processes that led to the militarization and demilitarization of such youths, I positioned myself at the intersection of what remained of a warlike apparatus in two settings located on either side of the former front line (two settings that could potentially be seen as sustaining a certain form of latent mobilization at the time the fieldwork was conducted), with what grounded the structures of interventions themselves (by placing externally-driven ‘post-conflict’ interventions into perspective in those two contexts). The main puzzle I wanted to address was to understand the extent to which externally-driven interventions targeting militarized civilians should be conceived as special processes compared to other social processes at play in the local environment. After all, and as it is exemplified several times in this study, for this particular type of recruit (militarized youth, non-professional and low-ranking), the borders are quite blurred between the different social arenas in which they find themselves evolving.

There is no doubt that the fact that I used to be part of the humanitarian scene before entering academia has shaped the way I approached the topic, both in terms of choice of methodology (by using humanitarian interventions as main outlook on how to empirically approach the topic of militarized civilians) and in

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2 The term ‘post-conflict’ is only used here for descriptive purposes. Refer to footnote 4 for the conceptual view of ‘war’ and ‘peace’ used in this study.

The terms ‘intervention’ and ‘humanitarianism’ refers in this study to humanitarian interventions targeting militarized civilians, aiming at facilitating their return to civilian life.

3 Going beyond this main questioning, it could also be worth reflecting on the extent to which an indigenous process of peace-building would be possible in western Côte d’Ivoire, given the existing knowledge of the local context.
terms of how I read and interpreted the existing theory (by drawing on personal experience when placing humanitarianism in a larger context of norms, of strategies of actors, and when ultimately bringing to the fore the relationship between militarized recruits and their social fabric). The Ivoirian context was not unknown to me before the start of this research (although the topic of militarized youths was), and having worn a ‘practitioner hat’ there for a year in 2003-2004 partly explains why I was so keen on attempting to formulate improvement strategies for existing interventions. But a practitioner background does not exclude reasoning, nor does it exclude a genuine willingness and ability to undertake in-depth analytical social exploration; several conceptual questions appeared relevant to examine as I dug deeper into the subject. What does it mean to be a ‘reinserted’ or a ‘reintegrated’ rebel or militia, and what does thinking in terms of dichotomy bring to the analysis when making the distinction between ‘reinserted’ and ‘non-reinserted’ recruits? Is it expected that there will be no regression into armed groups for the ‘reinserted’ ones? Under no circumstances?

If this is the expectation that motivates both the promotion of targeted interventions and the reasoning in terms of dichotomy (reinserted/non-reinserted), one has to seriously explore the specific context under investigation to assess the extent of influence of external interventions. With that in mind, I examined two particular geographical locations of western Côte d’Ivoire from both a micro-regional-level perspective and from the particular viewpoints of the recruits I interviewed. The fieldwork areas differed in terms of belligerent side (rebel-controlled vs. government-controlled) and in terms of main characteristics (size, rural/urban, ethnicity) and are further described in the immediate context section.

It could be argued regarding many aspects that, when post-war settings are mainly shaped by external interventions, there is a tendency to promote the forgetfulness of dreary events and to encourage the framing of the view that war was only an unfortunate interlude that disrupted a peaceful routine. Programmes that specifically address the reinsertion of militarized youths are generally keen on fostering non-military alternatives to soldiering and the option of integrating the regular army is rarely first brought to the fore, even when explicitly planned in a national security reform plan. In sum, when humanitarianism is at the core of a post-conflict setting, what tends to be artificially reproduced is the pre-war situation. There are however three major downsides to this situation: first, the impact of interventions on their direct environment tends to be overestimated; second, such a perspective tends to downplay the importance of war itself by reducing it to an anomaly and a brief episode upsetting some kind of (imaginary)
and third, if post-conflict interventions end up recreating the pre-war situation, it implicitly implies that humanitarianism can play a significant role in reproducing violent conflict, even if it does so unintentionally. After all, ‘the seeds of war are to be seen shooting up in peace’ (Richards, 2005a). By being de facto entangled in a given socio-politico-historical context, planned interventions inherit existing social networks and power relations which they have little control over. If they temporarily provide some kind of ‘protected’ humanitarian space, pre-war power relations are likely to continue to prevail, as well as social networks built during the war, which includes friendships and patronage relationships built within the military. It is also in this respect that humanitarianism targeting ex-combatants can potentially be seen as sustaining some form of latent mobilization: by keeping demilitarized people together, the setting they provide could possibly serve as platform to reactivate a military engagement in a later phase.

But another way to comprehend a post-conflict situation, much more appropriate for the Ivorian context, is to place humanitarianism to the side of a given system (instead of at its core) and to basically consider that planned interventions implemented in post-conflict contexts are just additional social opportunities among a wide array of other social opportunities. That does not mean that they do not have effects, and that these effects do not influence the local systems in some ways. Humanitarianism after all remains embedded in local stakes, whatever place it has in the local environment. But there are three advantages when taking this perspective: first, it suspends preconceived judgment in terms of impact; second, it acknowledges the agency of people who operate and who participate in such interventions; and third, it rests on the basic assumption that humanitarianism emerges from social action and is therefore as much subject to social changes as other social processes. External interventions would therefore not be necessarily ‘special’ and do not necessarily require to be treated specifically, especially in the Ivorian case, a country with a strong State apparatus, myriad civil society representatives and a civic culture accustomed to mediation and consultation.

What I propose to do in this study is to build on that second perspective (the one that posits humanitarianism to the side of a given system) by drawing on my own interpretation of the situation in western Côte d’Ivoire. Humanitarianism

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4 This remark relates to a certain view of ‘war’ and ‘peace’ that chooses not to impose a sharp categorical distinction between the two concepts, but that prefers instead to speak of a continuum. It avoids ‘quarantining war as a “disease” ’, and places war within the range of social possibilities. This perspective brings to the fore that ‘pre-war’ peace is often overestimated. It also points out that the shifts towards intense armed conflict is a process with many twists, turns and pauses and that return to peace ‘is a rocky path with many pitfalls’ (Richards, 2005a).
was never at the core of social change there and this point is proven on several occasions in this work; hence, it is a reasonably well-grounded hypothesis. During the period under study, the number of international humanitarian actors remained relatively marginal in comparison with other contexts. There were no more than 13 international NGOs in the area bounded by Duékoué, Toulepleu, Danané and Man, with a slight variation in numbers depending on the conflict phase, political developments, and availability of funding. The main question this study therefore attempts to address is determining the extent to which, in such situations, externally-driven interventions targeting militarized civilians should be conceived as special processes compared to other social processes at play in the local environment. The study will place ‘post-conflict’ humanitarianism into perspective in the contexts under examination, and will try to determine what eventually comes out of a humanitarian apparatus targeting ex-combatants when it does not play such a central role in their immediate contexts.5

There are two levels of reading. The first one – more descriptive – focuses on the different processes that led to the militarization and demilitarization of young civilians. I examine this point foremost by exploring the mobilization and de-mobilization contexts of western Côte d’Ivoire from the points of view of the ‘reinserted’ recruits interviewed. The second reading is more analytical, and reflects on the meanings of being a ‘reinserted’ rebel or militia, and on the relevance of thinking in terms of dichotomy when the different social arenas in which militarized civilians evolve overlap to such a degree. This naturally leads me to reflect on the extent to which complex socio-economic reinsertion processes can genuinely be driven by post-conflict interventions. I clarify below the conceptual framework I use for the scope of this work.

Defining militarized youths

The term ‘militarized youths’ encompasses a diversity of profiles in western Côte d’Ivoire, which are not exclusive but which have several conceptual implications. A first pattern consists of militarized youths locally recruited on both belligerent sides and affected in surroundings they know. On the counter-insurgent side, the proportion of the autochthonous6 population who were drawn into an armed

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5 When it does, what tends to be reproduced is the pre-war situation.
6 In Côte d’Ivoire, people define their ‘autochthony’ foremost in terms of geographical origin. The Ivorian territory has in fact been divided along ethnic lines for a long time and the existing divisions are not called into question by the current conflict. In the western region, the Guéré (or Wê) are the autochthonous population in Duékoué, Guiglo, Blolequin and Toulepleu, while the Yacoubas (or Dan) are the autochthonous population in Man and Danané. At the local level, the term ‘allochthone’ designates an Ivorian from a different region (in Guéré territory for instance, allochtones would be Baoulé, Yacouba, Sénoufo, Lobi, etc.) and the term ‘allogene’ designates a foreigner from a foreign
group was greater than the proportion of the non-autochthonous residents, but given that not everyone was living in the area when the war started, it is interesting to empirically check the extent of locality of the recruitment. The main peculiarity of the ‘local’ recruits is that they always remained involved in their pre-war social groups (close and extended family, friends, acquaintances); they simply forged additional social networks during the war, with some emerging from their participation in an armed group.

A second pattern consists of militarized youths who were not based in the western region when the war started but who were drawn into the movement either out of solidarity (the ones native to the region or those whose ideas had found resonance with a particular armed group), or by the prospect of possible post-war rewards. An important rationale indeed, when continuing to maintain close relationships with the armed group over time, was the prospect of benefiting from some sort of reinsertion or reintegration support promoted by post-conflict interventions. Another reasonable assumption could also be to hypothesize that those non-natives of the West would be more likely to stick with their respective armed groups if only to benefit from free accommodation where they lacked a pre-war footing, and from expressions of paternalist support on the part of their leaders.

A third pattern consists of people who were temporarily sent outside their place of residence at the beginning of the war, to fight on the front line or to assume logistical functions for advanced bases during the period of open fighting, before returning home. This was notably the case for many pro-government militia elements who lent a hand to the national army from late 2002 to early 2003 in pushing back the rebels. A variant was to remain in a military setting for a year after the period of open war had passed – a setting that sustained a form of violent mobilization potentially ready to be reactivated, were hostilities between belligerents to be resumed. On the counter-insurgent side, militia leaders set up several such paramilitary encampments in the region they controlled near the former front line. These were functional until 2005, when the bulk of self-demobilization occurred for the pro-government militias. On the insurgent side, since at the time the fieldwork was being conducted the rebel État-Major had no intention of starting to releasing recruits (talking about demobilization was then taboo in the rebel-controlled areas), a typical pattern was that most militarized civilians who had been drawn into the rebel forces continued to be based outside

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7 The base of UPRGO was in Zagné, the base of MILOCI was in Kahadé, the base of FLGO was in Guiglo.
their pre-war place of residence, with limited visibility on their geographical future. A standard trajectory was to have been active on the front line for a few months, at more or less advanced positions and in mobile bases as armed groups were advancing or retreating, and then to follow the group to a fixed base in one of the main localities of the West, where some military obligations persisted.

In contrast to this third pattern, a fourth one consists of youths who stayed in their place of residence for the entire war and who assumed the function of local vigilante. This only happened on the counter-insurgent side: in many localities, young civilians joined a local checkpoint team to ensure the security of their village and neighbouring localities, until the dismantlement of the rural checkpoints in 2005. If similar ‘vigilante’ phenomena occurred in other Ivorian regions, what was specific to the west was to view the participants in this circumstantial phenomenon as functioning at the same level as those who participated in warfare, notably by sustaining an idea of ‘post-war reward’ and by including some of them in the list of recipients of potential intervention benefits.

This patchwork of engagement types was characteristic of the militarized youths encountered during the study and cannot be delinked from the understanding of a certain temporality of conflict. What was the norm in 2002-2003, during the period of open fighting, was different from what occurred in 2004, when pro-government militias were still encamped in a military setting. This also differed from the situation in 2007, when the bulk of the pro-government militias had self-demobilized and when the rebel forces were continuing to militarily and administratively control the northern half of the country. The borders between the different spheres (military, civilian, humanitarian) have never been strict, varying according to the phases of conflict, individuals’ social networks and the extent of locality of the recruitment.

Structure of the book

The book is organized in nine chapters and a concluding essay. Chapter 1 introduces the study. It stresses the rationales of undertaking such research and pinpoints the questions the study eventually aims to address. Chapter 2 describes the research approach in very practical terms by explaining the methodological choices made and by reflecting on certain ethical considerations. Chapter 3 gives a brief overview of the theoretical debates relevant to this work by highlighting the paradox of external interventions and aspects of social movements theories that would be impossible to circumvent, given the scope of this study.

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8 This trend was also observed in other Ivorian regions (Chauveau et al., 2010).
9 They reappeared from time to time in the western region, but very rarely and very briefly. In other Ivorian regions, checkpoints were dismantled in May 2003, after the last official ceasefire.
Chapters 4 and 5 contextualize youths’ mobilization and demobilization. Chapter 4 places contentious movements into perspective by exploring the extent to which particular mobilizing and demobilizing contexts have been shaped by their historicity. Chapter 5 continues this contextualization exercise by exploring the extent to which, in the fieldwork locations, particular mobilizing and demobilizing contexts have been shaped by their immediate environments. It is a necessary step to assess the importance of historicity in such processes compared to more contingent and circumstantial factors. Based on a solid work of document reconstitution, Chapter 5 presents the main aspects of the conflict in the western region and the detailed ethnographic contexts of the geographical areas under study. In Chapter 6, the different armed factions that operated in the west during the period under study are described in detail, which brings to the fore the internal dynamics of these groups, their degree of ethnic mixity, which factions emerged earliest, which ones were absorbed by other groups, and the extent of ‘locality’ of recruitment.

Chapters 7, 8 and 9 are the empirical core of this book. Chapter 7 explores the profiles and motives of several young militarized civilians on both belligerent side. Chapter 8 reflects on the complex relationships militarized youths have had, throughout the years, with their immediate environment. It notably stresses the fluidity of borders between the military, civilian and humanitarian spheres, as well as their evolution over time. Chapter 9 examines processes of demobilization and of return to civilian life, and the extent to which such complex (re)socialization processes are externally driven. If it is increasingly recognized that this transition is foremost driven by endogenous factors, post-conflict interventions have become unavoidable in the past decade, for better or for worse, and there is therefore the need to understand what they can reasonably achieve in order to place them better in their operational contexts. Chapter 10 concludes by outlining the theoretical contributions this study has made to the field and by formulating practical propositions.