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

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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 faced much negative a priori with an overemphasis on irrationality, violence and lumpen individuals. This study is a first-hand attempt to bring some nuance to the fore for this specific geographical area, taking a time span from the combat operations of 2002-2003 to the partial demobilization of the pro-governmental militias in 2006-2007.

Background information

The recent conflict in Côte d’Ivoire has led to the militarization of many young civilians on both belligerent sides. While some were directly involved in combat operations when violence was at its peak (Fall 2002 – Spring 2003), others assumed more backstage functions, from the maintaining of military positions when some places were taken from the enemy to basic logistical duties; the main pattern eventually was to navigate between different functions depending on conflict phases and individual skills. If some of the youths were only militarized a few months (at the onset of conflict), others have continued their involvement into an armed movement over the years, after the main clashes were over, with some being particularly vocal about it. As the main theatre of violence, the west of the country has been particularly affected by the militarization of the civilian population and was chosen as terrain for this particular research. What has been of particular interest there is the fact that many of such 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 routine. This became particularly characteristic as the Ivorian war evolved into a situation of ‘no peace no war’ with sporadic violence still happening, but only at certain periods and within specific settings.

The term ‘militarized youths’ encompasses a patchwork of engagement type in western Côte d’Ivoire 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 of what was happening in 2004 when pro-governmental militias were still encamped in a military setting and also differed from the situation in 2007 when the bulk of the pro-governmental militias had self-demobilized and when the rebel forces were continuing to militarily and administratively control the northern half of the country. This diversity of profiles can roughly be categorized into four patterns: a first one composed of militarized youths locally recruited on both belligerent sides who stayed affected in surroundings they know for the whole period; a second one consisting of militarized youths who were not based in the western region when the war started but who were drawn into the movement either by solidarity or by the prospect of possible post-war rewards; a third one consisting of people who were sent outside their place of residence in the beginning of the war and who returned home once the peak of conflict had passed; and a fourth one consisting of youths who stayed in their place of residence for the whole duration of the war and who assumed a function of local vigilante.

The main puzzle

The main puzzle I attempted to address in this study has been to understand the extent to which, in western Côte d’Ivoire, externally-driven interventions targeting militarized civilians and aiming at facilitating their demilitarization and return to civil life should be conceived as special processes compared to other social processes at play in the local environment, in contexts were borders between the different spheres (military, civilian, humanitarian) have never been strict, and varied according to conflict phases, individuals’ social networks and extent of locality of the recruitment. Côte d’Ivoire is not the first land that pops into mind when thinking of countries that receive international humanitarian assistance. Its image of ‘Ivoirian miracle’ has stayed quite anchored in the general public opinion, and despite having undergone general impoverishment for nearly three decades, the country still appears in rather good shape in comparison with its western and northern neighbours. Even at the peak of the crisis, Côte d’Ivoire has been object of limited humanitarian attention. The study therefore attempted to place ‘post-conflict’ humanitarianism into perspective in the contexts under examination, and eventually tried to determine what eventually comes out of a humanitarian apparatus targeting ex-combatants when humanitarianism does not play such a central role in their immediate contexts.

Structure of the book

The book is organized in eight chapters and a concluding essay. Chapter 1 introduces the study. It stresses the rationales of undertaking such research and pin-
points the questions the study eventually aims to address. Chapter 2 describes the research approach on very practicable 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 for this work by namely highlighting the paradox of external interventions and aspects of social movements theories that would be impossible to circumvent given the scope of this study.

Chapters 4 and 5 contextualize the study. Chapter 4 places contentious movements into perspective by exploring the extent to which particular mobilizing and demobilizing contexts had 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 the conflict took 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 Seven, Eight and Nine are the empirical core of this book. Chapter 7 explores the profiles and motives of several young militarized civilians on both belligerent sides. Chapter 8 reflects on the complex relationships militarized youths have entertained over time with their immediate environment and notably stresses the fluidity of borders between the military, the civilian and the humanitarian spheres and their evolution in time. Chapter 9 examines processes of demobilization and return to civil life, and the extent to which such complex (re)socialization processes are being externally driven. If it is increasingly recognized that this transition is foremost driven by endogenous factors, post-conflict interventions have become unavoidable actors. If it is increasingly recognized that this transition is foremost driven by endogenous factors, post-conflict interventions have become unavoidable actors in the past decade. If it is increasingly recognized that this transition is foremost driven by endogenous factors, post-conflict interventions have become unavoidable actors in the past decade. If it is increasingly recognized that this transition is foremost driven by endogenous factors, post-conflict interventions have become unavoidable actors in the past decade. If it is increasingly recognized that this transition is foremost driven by endogenous factors, post-conflict interventions have become unavoidable actors in the past decade.

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The main conceptual and empirical findings

*Who joined armed groups and why?*

The Ivoirian case is a good illustration of the plurality of profiles and of the diversity of the forms of engagement. It also stresses quite well the importance of immediate contexts in explaining processes of violent mobilization. Enlistment
into armed groups in western Côte d’Ivoire has stemmed from highly circum-
stantial factors and has showed that in many cases, who mobilizes and who does
not has simply been a matter of geographic and military factors. It might sound
self-evident, yet it is striking to note how theories stressing the importance of
local territorial sovereignty and circumstantial factors are downplayed in the lite-
rature in comparison with theories that rest on assumptions of causality and that
emphasize the loose molecule hypothesis (those that set that adverse structural
conditions largely explain engagement into contentious politics). Whatever arm-
ed group is in control of a given place at a given moment is potentially the most
decisive factor in influencing people’s behaviour. This perspective places a
strong emphasis on the role of leaders and elite in promoting certain values within
society. In which circumstances have civilians taken up arms? What information
was then disseminated to the population? Who framed such local discourses,
and how has it been locally interpreted? If these dimensions are usually less put
forward in conflict analysis in comparison with explanations based on adverse
structural conditions, what happened in western Côte d’Ivoire highlights very
well the importance of answering each of the points above when attempting to
grasp local social processes of mobilization.

In terms of profile, the Ivorian case showed that there was no single pattern.
Recruits displayed very different pre-war trajectories and the study tends to de-
pict a picture that shows that it is people who are rather embedded into society
who are politically active, and not the alienated ones. Empirically, this finding
firmly dismisses the loose molecule hypothesis, which basically argues that the
most likely profile of low-ranking recruits consists of jobless, uneducated, and
dissocialized youths with few alternative prospects other than the one to resort to
violence to make ends meet.

Blurred spaces: Militarized youths and their relationships with their immediate
environment

It is often assumed that youngsters who have been involved in armed groups
must be resocialized after their military experience, as if their bond with society
was cut during their engagement and the vast majority of humanitarian programs
targeting ex-combatants are based on this postulate. There is yet growing evi-
dence that militarized civilians often keep contacts with civil life during their
period of engagement into an armed group, especially the ones locally recruited
who stay affected in their immediate surroundings (their main peculiarity in fact
is to never stop being involved with family, friends and pre-war acquaintances).
In western Côte d’Ivoire, many recruits I interviewed involved themselves in
extra-military activities when violent fighting diminished and there was always
basic logistics to ensure that implied continuous interaction with non-military
If not yet mainstreamed, this conception of armed violence as a prosaic and intermittent occupation calls for a nuanced approach when analyzing processes of violent mobilization, a one that foremost rests on the assumption that borders between the military, the civilian and the humanitarian spheres are fluid and blurred, especially once the period(s) of open fighting is passed. Rather than conveying the idea of a clear distinction between those three arenas, this study has stressed their overlaps, their dynamics, and has clearly dismissed strict conceptual boundaries. It has also stressed the opportunistic manoeuvres of the militarized youths, which has all the more reinforced such blurring effect.

On both belligerent sides, full time involvement into an armed group gradually evolved into a ‘part-time’ one after the period of open fighting was over. Relationships between militarized recruits and local populations have been based on a combination of solidarity and coercion and have varied over time depending on strength of ties and immediate stakes involved. Within the group of recruits locally recruited, persistence of family ties was a striking feature in both Guiglo and Man and the flows of food, cash and services were going both sides between the militarized ones and their respective families. But relationships with civilians were not confined to the close family structure and an important feature that the study has brought to the fore has in fact been that it is difficult to draw a clear line between the militarized life and the civil one since eating habits, accommodation practices, continued participation in the family affairs, oblige the militarized and the non militarized to continuously interact with the possible effect to have less and less distinct characteristics.

Return to civil life for militarized populations: Humanitarianism under lens

Since borders between military, civilian and humanitarian spheres have become increasingly blurred, especially as situations of ‘no war no peace’ tend to linger, the conceptualization of reintegration processes would undoubtedly gain if stopped being presented as a drastic change, ‘post’-military. If reintegration is foremost driven by internal processes (social networks and immediate surroundings playing a key role in these), post-conflict interventions are nonetheless also attempting to facilitate the return to civil life for militarized populations and have engaged in such programming for about a decade. If there are proponents and opponents of such type of intervention, reintegration programming has become so much part of any environment affected by warfare that it has become an unavoidable actor of any given system, regardless of one’s judgment when reflecting on the relevance of the intervention.

The examples of externally-driven interventions exposed in this study are striking illustrations that humanitarianism is far from being at the core in the post-war context of western Côte d’Ivoire. In contrast to other dynamics, human-
itarianism has not been the central driving force in the local environment, and people have not hesitated to opt out when better opportunities emerged elsewhere. Perhaps the fact that Côte d'Ivoire has not been as depleted as Liberia or Sierra Leone can be advanced as explanatory factor: the country is still rich and when the odds are good, it is still full of lucrative opportunities to take up. We are far from a situation where a myriad of humanitarian projects would run the risk to dry up important social mechanisms. What we saw instead is that humanitarianism has been locally used as something extra: to participants, it provided a social opportunity among a wide range of other social opportunities; to local dignitaries, it provided a way to add to their brokerage portfolio and to strengthen their local political influence.

Considering that planned interventions implemented in post-conflict contexts are just additional social opportunities among a wide array of other social opportunities does not mean that they do not have effects and that these effects do not influence the local systems in some ways. This case study has highlighted at least three: 1) the seizing of an opportunity, 2) the placing of close relatives in the income-generating activities fostered by the intervention (a variant being to hire someone to operate the activity on a regular basis), and 3) the boosting of demobilization and disarmament processes, an effect particularly pronounced with the youngest recruits but also noticeable for some older ones. What is of particular interest for the last two effects is that if they both result from unintended consequences of the interventions themselves, they are probably their most tangible outcomes: the second effect by bringing to the fore the ineluctable involvement of the close family structure in the potential benefits derived from the intervention, and the third one by giving a sense of closure to those who were once involved in an armed group. If rarely highlighted by the operators of postconflict interventions, these effects show well that the navigating strategies of the militarized youths between different spaces are not confined to their time within their respective armed groups. From the own perspectives of the youths benefiting from reintegration programming, placing someone else in a project looks like a logical move when more interesting streams emerge elsewhere and such behavior eventually only reproduces a well-embedded cultural pattern of patron/client relationship, teinted with some moral obligation when the close family is involved.

This last remark enables us to reflect on the extent of manipulation of the intervention by the clients themselves and to go beyond the usual patron-client relationship that depicts warlords as the only skilled manipulators of external assistance. There are many stakes in DDR-related interventions, even when the benefits seem at first hand minimal, and those who profit from them also play with them if it has the potential to serve their ends. This is why there is an urgent need to reconceptualize externally-driven demobilization and reintegration pro-
cesses, away from a segmented approach that overemphasizes the importance of the local elites in shaping the effects of the interventions, and towards a perspective that rehabilitates the room to manoeuvre of the low-ranking recruits and their continued links with their immediate environment. In situations where humanitarianism does not play such a central role in the local context, interventions do not run the risk to dry up the already existing social mechanisms that regulate social life, on the contrary, and one interesting finding of this study has actually been to stress that one possible effect of DDR-related interventions is to reinforce existing moral obligations, not to weaken them.
Photograph 15: Owner and apprentices in a wielding workshop, Man

Photograph 16: Tailoring workshop hosting former child recruits, Man