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Conflict legacies

Understanding youth's post-peace agreement practices in Yumbe, north-western Uganda

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Citation for published version (APA):

Both, J. C. (2017). Conflict legacies: Understanding youth's post-peace agreement practices in Yumbe, north-western Uganda.

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DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION: YOUTH AND THE LEGACIES OF CONFLICT

A dissertation about research in Yumbe District in north-western Uganda is likely to start with reference to its ruins and by narrating episodes of violence. Most of the limited academic and journalistic work on Yumbe seems to do so. These physical legacies of the Amin regime are powerful; however, they are not innocent images that circulate with regard to the people from Yumbe. They risk reinforcing the stereotypes that have so long dominated the image of the region and its people, the roots of which go much farther back than the Amin regime—to pre-colonial and colonial times, as Leopold shows (2005a, 2005b, 2006).³⁴⁷ In this dissertation, however, a new question was raised: namely, what is the impact of all this on the new generation? More specifically, I have looked at how young people—those aged roughly 20–35 who grew up in times of conflict—now engage with this particular past and with peace as it was established in 2002. With regard to these questions, the ruins and narratives on conflict are an important reference point for the younger generation now posing in pictures in front of them (see Chapter 4) and growing up in their midst (hence my use of the combined image on the cover of this dissertation). The questions then remain: How powerful are the forces of history in shaping a new generation's experience in Yumbe? And where lies the agency for challenging and changing such a seemingly self-determining destiny?

While the young people that are so central to this dissertation were themselves affected by past conflicts (often born in exile or in the period of hardship just thereafter) and sometimes were active child or youth participants in the latest episodes of violence, by the end of my research 11 years of 'peace' had prevailed and these young people were facing a question of great magnitude: namely, in light of lost, displaced and/or demoralized fathers and/or mothers, disrupted school careers, experiences with violence as children, child-combatant experiences (some), and against a background of endemic poverty, massive under-employment, and continuing collective grievances, can peace be maintained in the long term? Did it suffice for the Ugandan government to co-opt a few adult former rebel leaders to establish lasting peace in a region that has known a history of forced as well as voluntary recruitment of young people?³⁴⁸ Were these former rebel leaders the last aggrieved generation from the margins, and were they now settled? Would it suffice to promise the UNRF II liaison committee (all of them adults) the local development they requested in the peace negotiations to finally undo a sense of

³⁴⁷ Furthermore, similar ruined structures of houses are still standing in Moyo and Koboko sub-county, and they can probably be found throughout West Nile.

³⁴⁸ See Chapter 2 & 4

marginality amongst the people? And how would it work out if these political promises, made in December 2002, had still not materialized by the end of 2013?

In order to answer the research questions, I followed Argenti and Schramm (2012: 19) and Dickson- Gómez (2002), who argue that an ethnographic approach is best suited to study and aim to understand the impact of past conflicts on people's present-day lives. And following Shepler (2014) and Ortner (2006), I have suggested that practice theory allows for a grounded understanding of the intertwined nature of agency and structure in this process. The results of this research lay bare intricate dynamics and allow me to disentangle how some legacies of conflict operate in present-day Yumbe's social, economic, and political fabric. The findings will be summarized below, including the novel research questions that they raise. Importantly, through its ethnographic approach, this research contributes to understanding local practices by young people in the aftermath of conflict. This is a field of study, especially in more rural areas, that still deserves much attention in order to arrive at a better understanding of young people's predicaments and potential in such areas (cf. Sommers 2015). Indeed, most attention to African youth in conflict, post-conflict, and inter-conflict situations has been oriented towards urban youth (Titeca 2006; Vigh 2006; Berckmoes 2014).

In the following, I guide the reader through the main findings of each chapter: Chapter 2 elaborates on the enduring history of violence and conflict in what is currently Yumbe District, and thereby it automatically raises the research question this dissertation addresses, while providing the historical background for the other chapters. I have tried to contribute to a more nuanced reading of this history of conflict that is often presented in the same tropes in rather sketchy form. More work on this 'local history writing' is required, however.

The first two empirical chapters, chapters 3 and 4, address more subjective experiences of that same history and draw attention to what legacies of past conflicts might entail from the perspective of different generations. They draw attention to parents' experiences with violence (as survivors thereof) (Chapter 3) and militarism (Chapter 4). These chapters show that we cannot understand young people's practices without understanding the positions and experiences of their parents and how these have influenced young people's worldviews (see Dickson-Gómez 2002).

Chapter 3 on the recurrent experiences of conflict and displacement by the generation of parents to the youths in this study shows the magnitude and complexity of these experiences and their persistent influence in everyday life. Mothers claim they are still drawn back to their experiences of conflict in the present when they are faced with their extreme poverty. I have shown that even more elements of present-day hardship trigger painful memories, and younger people can be expected to be directly affected by this process while growing up. Young people also witness their parents and grievances vis-à-vis former rebels and the compensation they received. The legacies of the past that emerge here for young people are manifold and do not just pertain to the family sphere. We are presented with the image of a population left to its own devices to recover from persistent and debilitating experiences with extensive and enduring conflict. Many issues remain unresolved in the post-conflict environment 11 years after the peace agreement was signed, an agreement that contained unfulfilled promises of broad social, economic,

and political rehabilitation. The chapter particularly emphasizes how life is also shaped by material loss and how that influences the worldview of both generations. They feel disempowered by this material loss. In this chapter, I make a strong plea for not overlooking such material effects of conflict and how they affect the next generation. This approach contrasts with the predominant focus on people's psycho-social needs in post-conflict settings and suggests that the subject of material loss as a strong influence on people's dispositions today is worthy of more investigation.

Chapter 4 continues to discuss how a certain group of youths in Yumbe bear the imprint of specific legacies that appear subject to reproduction. It shows how young men relate to their fathers who were former military men and/or rebel combatants and elaborates on how these fathers, who were once in much better material and social positions, have lost status. They have been reduced to a state of poverty and have been actively demoralized. They lost the wealth accumulated during their soldiering under Idi Amin. Often their wealth during his regime was unlawfully appropriated, leading to the pejorative term *mafuta mingi*. Children born thereafter often hold their fathers' previous greed in spending money accountable for the lack of support during their childhoods. They do not judge their fathers for their role played in Amin's brutal regime or in later rebel parties, but they accuse them of greed and express the 'pain' this made them feel as adolescents. The absence of support and the feeling of pain are explained in their references to 'a lack of love' in the relationships with their fathers. Love in this context refers to material loyalty (see Bolten 2012), among other things. While their fathers still await redress in the form of pensions or promised 'compensation' money and reintegration packages, some young men, acting out of their own grievances, joined rebellions themselves and have afterwards equally become caught up in the dynamics of expectantly waiting for redress. In the process, I show, they have difficulty showing fatherly love themselves to their own children. The chapter therefore shows how legacies of militarism and rebellion can keep people dependent and waiting for redress for decades. This attitude is explained by the strong patrimonial relation of former rebel groups in Uganda to the current president Museveni (see Finnström 2010; Kagoro 2013), a relation that strongly influences people's dispositions. Therefore, I argue that the reproduction of a pattern of expectant waiting tied to military/ rebel 'careers' is highly political. The dynamic of reproduction I describe here does not confine itself to the family homesteads in Yumbe where fathers disappoint sons, who in turn become disappointing fathers; rather, the state (in the form of personalized rule by a military president who makes many promises that are not met) is deeply implicated in these generational dynamics.

While the specific enduring legacies of violence presented in these two chapters obviously influence young people in Yumbe and draw attention to continuities (of dispositions related to a position of marginality, poverty, loss and militarism) in the remote district, the subsequent three chapters pay more attention to ambiguities, diversity and agency amongst young people in their post-peace agreement practices. Following closely young people's everyday practices, I have argued, allows us to discover where references to the enduring effects of past conflicts emerge naturally or where they are negotiated (Ibrahim & Shepler 2011). The results do not allow the formulation of a

straightforward single answer to the question about young people's post-peace agreement practices and the role of conflict legacies therein in Yumbe, but they do reveal intricate dynamics that point to the need for a highly localized understanding of war and peace dynamics (see also Richards 2005; Vigh 2006; Berckmoes 2014; Lombard & Batianga-Kinzi 2014; Carayannis & Lombard 2015).

Chapter 5 set out to explore the self-perception of young Aringa men in relation to prevailing ethnic stereotypes, masculinity, and violence in Yumbe. In the history of Yumbe, these identities are interconnected, and I have argued that the self-imagination of a warrior-like identity is still³⁴⁹ a powerful and rather dominant disposition among a specific section of youth. The more general image and the more specific images that I present have their roots in pre-, colonial, and post-colonial legacies (see Chapter 2) and continue to influence young marginal youths' social imaginaries concerning their future possibilities in the absence of alternative options in Yumbe. Much of their social and discursive positioning vis-à-vis these prevalent stereotypes comes from the prevailing conditions of poverty and their resulting difficulty in fulfilling the masculine role of provider for their young families.

I also draw attention in the chapter to nuances and factors that explain the variety in young men's social positions and imaginaries. For example, I show how limited experiences with violence (in the family and/or individual history), access to education, and ability to obtain a regular income appear to be important factors generating more distance from the literal and powerful interpretations of the Aringa as inherently warrior-like that some youths rely on. Some young people actually claim they do not want to 'be in the regime' of the past and rather try to contribute to better prospects for their own young families. In fact, better-off peers do try to actively engage with the disaffected youths, but envy also plays an important role in the relationship between poor and better-off youth. In other words, this chapter shows how a social imagination people hold of themselves is fed by past experiences. Combined with an enduring deep poverty and lack of access to alternative opportunities (and therewith alternative self-imagery), this forms a potential impediment to lasting peace in Yumbe—where a specific group of young men feel they have only violent identities to fall back on / identify with.

Despite this pre-disposition shared by young men in a marginal position towards potential and accepted use of violence as a last resort, Chapter 6 shows how many disaffected youths try to contribute to what they see as 'social peace' by chewing khat. Following young people's discourse on khat use is revealing of how they see the dangers in the post-conflict social fabric and the ways in which negotiate their position vis-à-vis attitudes associated with conflict times, such as roaming around at night, envying others, or thinking about their own grievances concerning the past. The adults in their surroundings hold different opinions, however, on young people's drug use. They do not acknowledge that it is likely, following young men's self-analysis, that these drug practices to a certain extent prevent social disorder or a return to the bush to act on their grievances. Are the young men therefore correct when they claim that khat is peace-creating? The answer is ambiguous. Yes, with regard to how they try to engage in inward-

³⁴⁹ To understand how such an 'identity' came about throughout a violent history, see Chapter 2.

directed elevation and aim not to envy the more well-off people (and peers) in their surroundings, nor to be guided by their painful grievances vis-à-vis their upbringing and missed education. But taking a closer look, we see khat use impacts especially young women, the spouses of these young men that on average already have two children, and these children become more vulnerable to poverty and the absence of ‘fatherly love’. Therefore, it is not difficult to see how the young khat users potentially reproduce patterns that drove them to start using khat in the first place—of childhood deprivation, school dropout, and absent parents—all of which were explained by reference to conflict legacies.

Chapter 7 brings to the fore an understanding of the widespread engagement in cross-border mobility by young men and women from Yumbe. More specifically, I focus on mobility between Yumbe and the new ROSS after the country voted for secession and became independent from north Sudan on 9 July 2011. I have shown that at the time of my research, the perils involved in travelling and trying to make a living in south Sudan were many, but that this did not halt the frequent movements of my interlocutors across the border. I explain that one important reason that young people went there, despite the insecurity and sometimes horrific anecdotes of violence, was the fact that they were familiar with the idea that there was always a war taking place somewhere in their surroundings—and hence a normalization of conflict (and reference to their own courage) meant that my interlocutors were not particularly hesitant about dangerous migration. They were oriented more towards the opportunities they expected to find in Juba than towards the risks. This can also be explained by the long history of the West Nile people’s need to engage in the survival economy and, in particular, the Muslim Aringa experience and orientation towards ‘petty trading careers’ (see also Chapter 2).

Despite these explanations, a closer look into young people’s actual engagement in this temporary or long-term migration to south Sudan revealed very specific dynamics. Indeed, there was a large group of youngsters aiming to become ‘traders’ / engage in a migrant economy. However, something else also came to the fore—namely, the many cases in which the ‘need to escape’ informed the choice to ‘run to Juba’. In a large number of cases, these choices concerned the consequences of what I have come to call ‘intimate crises’ between young couples. Most often, the need to run away arose for boys after they had impregnated their girlfriend. On other occasions, engagement in theft or other trespassing of local norms or national laws caused people to flee local sanctions or legal prosecution.

In the last part of the chapter, I ponder how we should understand the larger terrain in which young people from Yumbe engage through their mobility. I have argued that they are deeply involved in *frontier practices* that possibly sustain insecurity in this frontier region in which Yumbe is also deeply embedded for the last century and a half. Being part of such a volatile region and with practices adapted to it suggests that people in Yumbe will remain deeply connected with instability in the region for some time ahead.³⁵⁰

³⁵⁰ Important to note here is that most of this study has focused on the positions and practices of young men with a relatively low educational background. While forming the majority amongst the youth groups, this means most of the findings concern a particular subsection of youth, so often seen as a unified single category. I have

What do these specific practices of identification (Chapter 5), drug (ab)use (Chapter 6), and mobility (Chapter 7) tell us about young people's post-peace agreement practices in Yumbe in relation to a conflict-affected history? We can delineate at least *four* major dynamics through which the past emerges as dominant in (re-)structuring experience or is actively negotiated by youth in Yumbe District.

First, the past acts as a point of reference. It serves to inspire young men to refrain from behaviour that caused havoc to people in the past. This becomes particularly clear in Chapter 6, where I study how young men reflect on society and the kind of restraint they claim to practice in order not to contribute to social disorder but to maintain social peace. While it is much contested and debatable whether khat use is really the means to achieve this, it shows how for young men the social relations in times of conflict (especially seen in their efforts to avoid feeling envy) serve as a point of reference for their aim to behave differently. Becoming less mobile ('staying in one place' through consuming khat together in a group) and trying not to act upon their grievances—by containing their negative emotions towards their fathers and former rebel commanders, as well as towards the better off—can be understood as aiming to contribute to a different social fabric than the one they know from their childhood and early youth.

Second, I have shown how, unwillingly or unintentionally, young men seem to at least partly reproduce family patterns that gave rise to their own childhood grievances. In this way, conflict legacies can influence patterns of parenting that endure. This becomes particularly clear in chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7, where we see that when young men face serious difficulties in providing for their families, they sometimes, acting out of despair, join rebel-groups or become khat-consuming fathers. In both cases they are unable to show their children the 'love' whose absence so deeply marked their own childhoods growing up in the aftermath of war, exile, and rebellion. The same problem emerges for children of those fathers 'on the run' in Chapter 7.³⁵¹

Third, there emerges the notion of a kind of 'second nature' or habitus that influentially shapes young people's practices: for example, chapters 4 and 5 deal with the youth's rebel mobilization, self-identification as conflict-prepared, and fearlessness, which are arguably dispositions strongly shaped by a past deeply marked by conflict. In the past it was important that people could defend themselves against invaders, that they could hunt and bring back food and respect to the home, that young men were vigilant, protected the family, and engaged in survival against all odds—which often meant making use of the volatile terrain at hand and engaging in petty trade in conflict-affected areas to maximize profits, or leaving everything behind to engage in labour migration, especially leaving in cases of conflict.³⁵² All in all, such social practices still occur frequently in the

tried to pay attention to young women in the various chapters as mothers, as migrants, and as spouses of khat users. But to draw conclusions on the exact role of women in the processes here described requires more research. Likewise, I have occasionally brought to the fore that an emerging group of youth with Bachelor's and or Master's education seem to hold different positions in Yumbe District; however, they do not escape some of the practices that emerge as core to the region (see the chapter on migration) nor do they escape the influences of legacies of conflict (see in particular the references to Charles's life history throughout Chapter 5).

³⁵¹ The roles of mothers in these processes deserve more research.

³⁵² See references to the work of Middleton, Dak, Leopold, and Meagher in this dissertation.

specific terrain that Yumbe is part of. In fact, the descriptions in this dissertation show how practices inherent to a frontier and conflict-affected region—as also strongly shown in Chapter 7—tend to prevail, at least amongst youths, despite the notion of peace that has become dominant in the past decade as a reference point. In chapters 4, 5, and 7, it becomes possible to imagine how the persistence of such more habitual practices potentially contributes to a continuing volatility of the region. At the same time, these are not practices shaped only by the past. Despite building on a specific habitus, I have shown throughout the dissertation that persistent marginalization and poverty are responsible for the need of such practices of survival to prevail. While some positive developments in Yumbe are visible with regard to the expansion of so-called ‘development programmes’, at the same time young people face a difficult time benefiting from these programmes—partly because some of them face exclusion due to their khat use (and growth) and the related stigmatization, and partly because they largely work in the informal economy, a domain untouched by official ‘development agendas’. I have described how, under these conditions, young men face significant difficulty providing for their families, which leads to despair and a ‘fall-back’ on bodies a practice deeply shaped by colonial history (see for example Grahame 1980 and chapter 5 of this dissertation).

Fourth—and here we return to a more optimistic finding as also shared under the first dynamic delineated above—many youths actively display a willingness to do things differently from how they were done by the generation of their parents. This can be considered one of their projects vis-à-vis the past and its legacies. Recall O. in Chapter 5, who says he does not want to be in the *regime of the past*. And this intention, this wish appeared to be key to young men’s ambitions, especially to the khat users and young ex-combatants that I interviewed. As soon as we came to speak about their own young children, they expressed wishes for them to grow up in different circumstances. The main focus of all these young fathers was on education, something so many of them had not been able to obtain themselves to any reasonable degree. The aim for change is also evident in the following example, which I believe is at once an expression of hope and of a break with the past: When Amadile Charles, whose Aringa name means ‘they have come to kill us’ (see Chapter 5 on the circumstances of his birth) had his first daughter, he gave her the name Peace (suggested by his father) and gave her the second name ‘Lucy’. Here we see not only an expression of hope, with its reference to peaceful times. We also see a discontinuity: the experience of conflict as central and deeply permeating cultural practices such as name giving was challenged. Names like his that referred to hardship were still very prominent in his and previous generations. But young people of his own generation were sometimes openly debating what such a name would involve for the individual.

While the above hints at hope for the next generation, I cannot help but end this section with a more gloomy remark about this name. Charles told me he purposely did not give his daughter an Aringa name. Aringa names, he argued, were often recognizable for people from other parts of Uganda by the fact that they started with an ‘A’, among other factors. He argued such a name could lead to unfavourable treatment while studying in Kampala, for example, or when applying for jobs. He purposely chose a name that would not allow people to trace his daughter’s ‘Aringa’ roots in order to protect her

from discriminative practices and give her better perspectives in the future. It is clear he expected certain stereotypes and inequalities facing the Aringa to prevail even 20 to 25 years in the future.

Pondering on all the above observations, it becomes evident how the study of youth in this region provides a unique view vis-à-vis the study of youth in other regions in 'post-conflict' Africa and where one of the theoretical contributions of this dissertation lies (rendered by the historical and generational approach combined with the focus on young people's practices). I end this chapter with these concluding reflections.

YOUNG PEOPLE AND THE HABITS OF WAR AND PEACE

Bourdieu's definition of habitus refers to 'a system of lasting, transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciation and actions...' (1977: 82-83). Habitus, then, becomes understood as deeply embodied processes of social reproduction, as 'history turned flesh'.

An interesting approach to the study of youth in 'post-conflict' societies emerges by reflecting on this notion of habitus. Here I take up the debate with recent studies on young people in Africa coming of age in volatile, uncertain environments. Influential in this field of study has been the work of Vigh, who studied the ways in which young men in Guinea Bissau in the late 1990s and early 2000s sought 'to draw and actualize their life chances in a shifting and volatile social environment' and who came up with the 'theory of social navigation' (Vigh 2006: 11). While the ensuing analysis in his book *Navigating terrains of war* is very insightful, one particular notion that has been widely influential and has also informed other influential studies on youth in conflict environments (see for example Berckmoes 2014, 2015) is the relatively large emphasis on the volatility of the social environment and the agent's constant need for improvisation in order to ensure social, political, and actual survival. In such contexts, many researchers argue—building on the work of de Certeau (1984)—that there is space only for tactical navigation by agents. This means that they constantly have to respond to the immediate turns and tides of their environments. Citing Bauman, Berckmoes proposes that in such a context the unintelligibility and unpredictability of the social environment ensures that 'memory, learning, and calculating are "useless, if not downright suicidal"' (Berckmoes 2015: 2, citing Bauman 1991: 1). Similarly, Vigh tends to dismiss habitus and habitual action in such a situation as functional, stating that 'in war habits are a luxury—or idiocy—that one can barely afford'³⁵³ (Vigh 2006: 154). Yet, I would like to argue here that the working of habitus is potentially too easily dismissed and requires a re-evaluation in the study of people's practices in a conflict and post-conflict environment.

One reason for the difference in stance is that the perspective of these authors on disorder (Bauman 1991), chronic crisis and decline (Vigh 2008), and unpredictability

³⁵³ Based on the idea that it can be dangerous to rely on habits in a rapidly changing environment and that the change and unpredictability of the ever-moving environment shaped by crisis and decline prevents routines from developing into new habits, as they are 'never durable enough to become habitual' (Vigh 2006: 155).

and unintelligibility (Berckmoes 2015) are based on work in a different context from that of 'post-peace agreement Yumbe'. During my fieldwork, the social-political environment in Yumbe was one that was heading much more towards stability and predictability than it had been for a long time, despite the political volatility in the larger region as well and the continuous reference to the potential return of conflict in Yumbe.³⁵⁴ What I was witnessing shows a reversed process from the one described by the above-mentioned authors: the terrain was becoming more intelligible, but the legacy of a long past characterized by violent conflict and insecurity had led to a habitus prepared to engage with volatile circumstances.

Unlike Vigh, who argues that in war habits are dangerous (Vigh 2006: 154), findings in my work suggest that growing up with conflict and having experienced volatility for decades, people's habitus has become so attuned to such circumstances that it is now perhaps even a misfit in the more 'stable environment' and the general situation of 'peace'. In other words, when one grows up in conflict and is accustomed and socialized (from early childhood, see Swartz 2002) to its occurrence and specific threats, what happens if one then suddenly finds oneself in a more stable situation, in which one's potentially war-attuned habitus is no longer fitting, applicable, or accepted? If indeed habitus expresses itself in 'unconsciously repeated actions' (Vigh 2006: 154), what happens in society in such a situation? When are certain habits no longer fitting? And how do people deal with this experience? Do these habits slowly disappear, or do they perhaps only move into the background? And with increasing insecurity (not unlikely in the West Nile region), can these habits rapidly be called upon again? The latter sounds as if I present it as the agent's conscious choice to consider what to do with his or her 'no longer appropriate habitus'; however, what this study shows, rather, is how memory, habitus, and identification practices may work together to socially *reproduce* certain social structures and practices in 'peace-time' that actually fit better in wartime. One thing is clear, at least: these factors (memory, habitus, and identification) need to be deeply understood to explain people's present-day dispositions.

Too often the study of youth concentrates on present and future orientations (see for example Mains 2010; Honwana 2012), on youths as actors that 'simultaneously navigate the immediate and the imagined' (Vigh 2006: 13). The present research asks the question: what about their past as it influences their practices (through the workings of memory, identity, the body, emotions such as fear)? The recognition that young people have histories too, that they at least partially base their practices on their past experiences and/or that of their parents, returns our gaze to the social structures they come from (their family relations), their history, and their environment. This perspective is key to a fuller understanding of young people's practices, their contributions to society, and their contribution to social change or social reproduction—questions that become particularly pertinent in the aftermath of conflict.

³⁵⁴ That such reference to a potential return of conflict kept reoccurring is touched upon in Chapter 5, but also during fieldwork I was often informed by specific well-informed people that something was about to happen or was likely to happen in Yumbe; and they occasionally warned me seriously to be very careful in going 'to the field', i.e. moving from Yumbe Town to the various sub-counties of the District.

While the notion of habitus is perhaps too all-encompassing and static and has difficulty shaking off the connotation it seems to carry that agency has little room in all this (see Ortner 2006), I do see it as an important sensitizing concept that emerges from reading different layers of my data—not only because of what emerges in daily practices that relates to past experiences, but also because of the way in which these practices are considered natural and are widely accepted. A focus on habitus also allows us to question changes in the field or terrains/environment (as Vigh, referring to Ingold, calls it, 2006: 12). If people's habitus to a certain extent remains similar to that before the peace agreement, what does this say about the changes that the peace agreement has really brought about in Yumbe? Perhaps on the experiential level and on the level of social relations, formal peace has not yet fully permeated everyday life.