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Masculinity and mass violence in Africa: Ongoing debates, concepts and trends

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Rose Løvgren

**Masculinity and mass violence in Africa:
Ongoing debates, concepts and trends**

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	4
INTRODUCTION	5
ANXIOUS YOUNG MASCULINITIES.....	6
NAVIGATING MASCULINITIES.....	10
PATRIARCHIC MASCULINITIES.....	14
VULNERABLE MASCULINITIES.....	18
WHAT TO THINK OF MASCULINITIES AND MASS VIOLENCE NOW?	21
REFERENCES	22

ABSTRACT

Attention to the role of masculinity in mass violence on the African continent seems to have been rising in recent years. The gender identities of men as perpetrators, recruitment pools, and victims of violence are subjects of increasing discussion within academia and policy making. This working paper sketches out ongoing debates, concepts and trends within the literature that engages masculinity and the concept's relation to war, conflict and genocide in various African countries. Highlighting implicit assumptions about gendered hierarchy and difference, as well as their imperial and colonial legacies, the working paper draws up analytical tendencies in how African masculinities have been constructed within interpretations of violence. Rather than provide answers to how masculinities should be understood, the paper focuses on critically inquiring into the political implications of various existing conceptualizations and policies concerning the gendered dynamics of mass violence.

INTRODUCTION

This working paper aims to draw up an overview of the ongoing debates, concepts and trends in research concerning masculinity and mass violence in Africa. What follows is a literature review of a variety of texts examining the male gender aspects of conflict, war and mass violence in African countries. It is underpinned by four key questions: What is the historical context for the ongoing debates about masculinity and mass violence in Africa? What are the different conceptualizations and assumptions in the existing literature on the subject? How does the literature relate male gender identities to fighting, killing and suffering in conflict settings? And finally, how do gendered readings of the complexities of violence reflect back onto theorizing gendered hierarchy and difference? (see also Kirby and Henry 2012).

The motivation behind the paper is that there seems to have been a growing political and social scientific interest in masculinity and mass violence in African countries within the last twenty years. Journalists, international organizations and ethnographers of war have increasingly centered their attention on the masculine identities of fighters, perpetrators of sexual violence and unemployed youths, often considered “the pools for rebel recruitment” (Williams 2011, 41; see also Abdullah and Rashid 2004; Ricardo and Barker 2005; Vess et al. 2013; Mohamed 2015). Where femininity for many years was the main subject of inquiries into gender identities, masculinity is increasingly being examined in relation to assessments of security threats and interpretations of ongoing mass violence (Moran 2010).

This working paper attempts a characterization of how conceptions of African masculinities have been understood in relation to the specific types of violence performed in times of war and political conflict. In the wider global context, masculinity has in much popular debate and in some socio-biological, evolutionist and psychological writings been characterized as naturally aggressive (Wood and Jewkes 2001; Wade 2013). Warfare and especially sexual violence within this perspective are construed as extreme instances of how “boys will be boys” (Lander 2014, 308; see also Baaz and Stern 2013). In interpretations that center on the natural aggressions of man, the African continent has historically represented a place of nature in its most absolute terms (Mbembe 2001). Colonial and imperial politics as well as the natural and social sciences has accordingly treated African men as the rawest and most natural expression of masculinity (Stoler 1995; Mbembe 2001; Elkins 2005).

Variations of this view, I argue, are still to be found in some parts of the literature focusing on masculinity and mass violence in Africa, as I will illustrate below. The strong racist connotations to such interpretations are arguably problematic, as is the suggestion that African men are inherently violent. Moreover, how the gender identities of African men are understood within and outside times of conflict is generally a politically important question. Concepts of gender identities are highly significant when it comes to the distribution of economic resources, education and a range of other matters, as seen in the practical implementations of

gender mainstreaming policies by the United Nations (UN) as well as other international organizations and national governments (Moran 2010; Drumond 2012).

A growing scholarship on masculinities at war is currently attempting to disrupt and enrich our understandings of masculinities and violence (e.g. Higate 2003; Connell 2005; Cockburn and Enloe 2012), and this is no less the case in the research concerning mass violence in Africa. In what follows, I identify four types of masculinities, which have been related to mass violence in African countries. I term them 'anxious young masculinities', 'navigating masculinities', 'patriarchic masculinities' and 'vulnerable masculinities'.

There is, I think, nothing specifically African about them. I treat them in isolation, not to argue that Africa is a distinct entity, which is fundamentally different from the rest of the world, but to engage with a tendency to treat the continent as exactly that. From colonial documents to contemporary assessments of security threats by scholars and international organizations, there are repeated references to 'Africa', 'Sub-Saharan Africa' and to the gender identities of 'African men' (Carothers 1955; Corfield 1960; Safilos-Rothschild 2000; Ricardo and Barker 2005; Vess et al. 2013). By sketching up these different trends in understanding African masculinities in mass violence, the paper aims to explicitly address gendered and raced assumptions, which are often made implicitly. Few of the authors I cite fit neatly into one category, but may be said to characterize both e.g. anxious and patriarchic masculinities. Thus, what I present here is an initial overview of major themes in the literature, rather than major works. The four types of masculinities I draw up are intended to summarize analytical trends, rather than paint a picture of types of men. Each section highlights common tenants within the literature's association between male gender identities and mass violence, and follows up with some of the gendered critiques, which can be directed at these arguments.

ANXIOUS YOUNG MASCULINITIES

Mass violence on the 1990s African continent spurred great debate about the kinds of men performing it. The conflicts of Liberia, Sierra Leone and Rwanda especially, were analyzed with a view to understanding what kind of men were fighting in them, and why they would fight the way they did. The Rwandan genocide of 1994 with its images of genital mutilation and its almost incomprehensibly high number of reported rapes – around 250,000 within three months (Human Rights Watch et al. 1996) – may be said to represent a turning point. In its aftermath, numerous scholars and commentators sought to make sense of the perverted and atrocious actions having taken place, which led to heated debates on the type of masculinity it represented.

Much of the debate took its point of departure in geopolitical analyst, Robert Kaplan's influential essay 'The Coming Anarchy', wherein he termed these men 'loose molecules' (Kaplan 1994). Young men in Africa, Kaplan argued, were like loose molecules, anxious as a result of having been raised in developing countries where norms were changing from rural-traditional to urban-modern and longing

to find anything to grab onto. Living in a world of flux and fitting in nowhere, anxiety within these young men turned to aggression and a desire for general disruption and chaos. Kaplan quotes an unnamed African Minister for telling him:

“We did not manage ourselves well after the British departed. But what we have now is something worse—the revenge of the poor, of the social failures, of the people least able to bring up children in a modern society. [...] The boys who took power in Sierra Leone come from houses like this.” The Minister jabbed his finger at a corrugated metal shack teeming with children (Kaplan 1994).

Kaplan’s interpretation of young masculinities and war in West Africa has enjoyed great popularity in many areas of political debate. In political scientist Mary Kaldor’s widely referenced works on modern warfare, she terms Kaplan’s essay a collection of “compelling descriptions” (Kaldor 2007, 145), and Kaplan’s essay was moreover distributed to all American embassies in Africa (Richards 1996). Within Africanist scholarship however, there has been broad agreement that the text is problematic in its characterization of Africans as brutal and aimless expressions of “nature unchecked” (Kaplan 1994; for critiques see for example Richards 1996; Abdullah 1998; Vigh 2007; Bøås 2007; Hoffman 2011). In spite of this critique, the association Kaplan makes between anxious young men struggling to deal with changing times and mass violence has often been repeated.

Economist Célestin Monga explains the 1990s mass violence with reference to a distinctly African youth culture. He writes: “urban civilization in sub-Saharan Africa today bears the stigmata of the political and social upheavals that have occurred time and again since independence” (Monga 1996, 94). From these ongoing uncertainties, Monga argues, has grown a nihilist Rambo culture, wherein young men “have manifested their disgust through a greater need for violence” (Monga 1996, 95). In a similar vein, political scientist Morten Bøås terms the insurgents of Sierra Leone’s *Revolutionary United Front* (RUF) fragile young men who, because of the uncertainties of globalization, “develop[ed] a mindset of hatred against their society, their communities, their elders, even their parents, that was unleashed in anger when a gun came within their reach” (Bøås 2007, 46; see also Møller 2004). Bøås continues to argue that when it comes to African male youth cultures,

[a]ll it takes is one individual with an idea about something else and the means to transform his ideas into action – call it resistance, call it revolt, call it violence, robbery – and they are game, eager to settle the score of humiliation and marginalization (Bøås 2007, 52).

Scholars linking humiliation to violent aggression at times make a note of how the anxious young people they are describing are mostly men, but rarely delve into reflections on the implicit assumption that it is masculine humiliation which leads to violence (see for example Fanon 1967; Keen 2008). Absent from the discussion is a gendered engagement with the question: Why is female humiliation so often treated as a phenomenon that makes women vulnerable, and male humiliation treated as a phenomenon that makes them dangerous?

Historian Ibrahim Abdullah follows this script, when he argues that a 'lumpen' youth culture explains the brutality of war in Sierra Leone.

By lumpens, I refer to the largely unemployed and unemployable youths, mostly male, who live by their wits or who have one foot in what is generally referred to as the informal or underground economy. They are prone to criminal behaviour, petty theft, drugs, drunkenness and gross indiscipline [...] It is a male-specific oppositional culture which easily lends itself to violence. [...] they are to be found in every city in Africa (Abdullah 1998, 207-208).

The reason these lumpens easily lend themselves to violence is that they have "an axe to grind" (Abdullah 1998, 218) with the world. It is especially the widespread use of sexual violence, which to Abdullah proves that the lumpens were nothing but wild young men on the loose. As there can be no political justification for treating innocent women the way the RUF did, Abdullah rules out any interpretation of their actions as political. Underlying the characterization of sexual violence as the product of 'gross indiscipline' is an understanding of male libido as naturally aggressive. It may be inferred from Abdullah's characterization that he understands men to be having something in them, which unless disciplined will seek to destroy their surroundings.

Economist David Keen similarly argues that sexual violence in Rwanda was caused by an "absence of mechanisms to punish offenders" which "encourage[d] human traits that would otherwise be kept in check" (Keen 2008, 52). Such human traits, are by political scientist, Bjørn Møller, characterized as "pure and uninhibited libido" (Møller 2004, 20, *my translation*), which is what he refers to in his interpretation of sexual violence in Rwanda. In line with Abdullah's view, Yusuf Bangura argues that the proof of the apolitical and lumpen character of the RUF, lies in their treatment of women and children (Bangura 1997). There is no way, Bangura argues, that men who cut off the hands of children can be understood as having a political purpose.

Abdullah, Bangura and other scholars based in or originating from African countries have associated young male rebels fighting in contemporary African conflicts with the 'naughty boy' character present in various African oral traditions and contemporary popular culture (Utas 2003, 137). For example, the *rarray boys* in West Africa and the *bayaaye* in East Africa denote undisciplined young men, who are badly raised, untrustworthy, sexually promiscuous, and stand in opposition to all kinds of authority (see for example Museveni 1997; Kandeh 1999; Adetula et al. 2003; Gberie 2005; for an analysis of the *muyaaye* character see Verma 2013). Economist Thandika Mkandawire explicitly compares these male youth figures from all over the continent, and argues that it is their prominence in rebel movements that has caused increased violence against Africa's rural populations (Mkandawire 2002).

The arguments of Bangura and Abdullah were presented in a discussion with the works of anthropologist Paul Richards. Richards' ethnographic exploration of the young men fighting in Sierra Leone stresses the rationality behind seemingly

meaningless actions of mass destruction. Moreover, his works aim to construct a different picture of the kinds of men fighting in the RUF. Many of them were highly educated, he argues, listened to BBC in their forest camps, and could “quote liberally from *Macbeth*” (Richards 1996, 126). Thus, the discussion of the rationality of mass violence in African countries was in the 1990s is closely related to discussing what kinds of men performed it. Were they undisciplined boys brought up in metal shacks teeming with children? Or were they university graduates with culture who listened to BBC? Whether mass violence is termed political and rational is in both cases answered with reference to the kind of masculinity involved.

In many parts of especially the 1990s literature on masculinity and mass violence in Africa, there are distinct echoes of colonial interpretations of mass violence. Colonial officials and ethno-psychiatrists (employed by the World Health Organization) explained the workers’ strikes and rebellions of the late colonial period by arguing that it was performed by anxious young men in the middle of a process of ‘detribalization’. Detribalization referred to changes among colonial subjects of values from traditional to modern. It was argued to cause “an anxiety which, as has been shown, the African is not well-suited to sustain.” (Carothers 1955, 10; see also Honigmann 1954). Detribalization was considered to occur when African men moved to the big colonial capitals and engaged in “temporary and sordid”¹ (cf. White 1990, 3) unions with women. Frank Corfield from the British colonial administration in Kenya gave the following explanation for why men were rebelling against the empire in the 1950s:

in his insecurity the African ‘in transition’ craves to belong once more to a collective organism, hence the great attraction of trades unions and political movements (Corfield 1960, 9).

In other words, there is a long existing imperial tradition of using a narrative of anxious young men to explain mass violence on the African continent as expressions of pathological masculinities and remove or downplay political and economic issues. When approaching masculinity and mass violence on the African continent, it is important to keep this historical context in mind.

Finally, the prevalent assumption that anxious young masculinities were the cause of the 1990s atrocities in Africa has led to repeated oversights of who committed the violence. The Rwandan genocide of 1994 has repetitively been explained with reference to a critical mass of disconnected male youth (Sellsström and Wohlgemuth 1996; Prunier 1998; Kakwenzire and Kamukama 2000; Mamdani 2002; Melvern 2004; Møller 2004; Münkler 2004; Alison 2007; Keen 2008; Jones 2009; Sommers 2012; de Lame 2012). Research concerning the characteristics of the actual genocide perpetrators however, portray them as “in every way ordinary members of their community. They were all married with children. Their average age was thirty-two [...]. Most stated their occupation as cultivator or farmer” (Fujii

¹ Quote from the municipal native affairs officer of Nairobi’s ‘Memorandum on the Housing Problem’ from 1941.

2009, 130; see also Verwimp 2005; Straus 2008). Part of the reason relates to the dual reference of *interahamwe*, which originally denoted a youth wing of the government party that instigated the genocide, but during the course of the genocide came to denote any member of a killing group (Fletcher 2007). Another reason, I would argue, relates to a propensity among observers of violence to explain atrocious actions with reference to masculinity in its raw and undisciplined form. In Herfried Münkler's characterization of modern forms of war, he quotes journalist Michael Ignatieff for arguing that

[i]n most traditional societies honor is associated with restraint, and virility with discipline [...] The particular savagery of war in the 1990s tap into another view of male identity – the wild sexuality of the adolescent male. Adolescents are supplying armies with a different kind of soldier – one for whom a weapon is not a thing to be respected or treated with ritual correctness but instead has an explicit phallic dimension. [...] War has always had a sexual dimension [...] but when war is conducted by adolescent irregulars, sexual savagery becomes one of its regular weapons (cf. Münkler 2004, 20).

Anxiety and uncertainty works in a variety of ways in the literature on anxious young masculinities. They are concepts attributed to Africa's young men, but they seem equally significant in the way outside observers relate to these men. Young men are characterized as ushering in "[t]he coming anarchy" (Kaplan 1994), and many of these texts have a distinct expression of anxiety and uncertainty about such changes. The fantasies of wild and raw masculinity that fuel Ignatieff's and similar interpretations of sexual violence clearly express fear and horror about the male 'savagery' they portray. This phenomenon makes it unclear in parts of the literature, whose anxiety we are talking about. By being attentive to the political context in which popular understandings of masculinity and mass violence is produced, we may better engage these understandings critically. The 1990s in which much of the literature on anxious young masculinities came out, seems to have been marked by a general sense of anxiety about what changes in gender roles and political organization would be brought about by the violence on and outside of the African continent.

NAVIGATING MASCULINITIES

In the aftermath of the 1990s discussions about what kind of men were fighting in Africa's violent conflicts, a number of especially ethnographers have sought to disturb or rethink this approach. Rather than describing a particular kind of aggressive masculinity, they have drawn on Judith Butler's performative approach to gender in order to characterize the fluidity of male gender identities (Butler 2006). With an understanding of gender as continuously performed, these scholars have attempted to flesh out the multiple femininities and masculinities in plural to elucidate how these identities play out and change within violent settings (Jensen 2008). This approach may be said to characterize navigating or negotiating masculinities, that is, men who are perpetually in the process of reestablishing their male identities.

In Henrik Vigh's ethnography of youth and soldiering in Guinea-Bissau, he

presents a picture of the men who commit mass violence as primarily motivated by livelihood opportunities. Their focus is on “social possibilities rather than sheer resource appropriation” (Vigh 2007, 29), and central to many of them is the social possibility of marriage. Young men in Guinea-Bissau are thus argued to use recruitment into armed combat as one of many strategies for social navigation. One of Vigh’s respondents state that “women cannot suffer like men” (Vigh 2007, 103), referring to how his girlfriend and baby need to eat every day and, unlike himself, cannot go hungry while searching for opportunities. In Vigh’s ethnography, mass violence is thus differentiated along gendered lines. However, the men fighting are not motivated by masculinity in crisis, but by practical considerations organized by their understanding of what men and women are able to do. Ethnographer Mats Utas describes how young men in the Liberian civil war, used war as an initiation into adulthood (Utas 2003). Deliberately drawing on a mix of traditional and modern references, young men approach war as a rite of passage, Utas argues, to emerge as respected men (see also Moran 1995; Rasmussen 2010). Thus, this ethnography follows Vigh’s in explaining male participation in mass violence as strategic.

The point of departure for ethnographies of navigating masculinities is similar to that of anxious masculinities – a large group of young men find themselves socially and economically marginalized and take up arms as a response. But whereas scholars like Abdullah, Keen and Bangura interpret these actions as the apolitical movements of humiliated men who want revenge on the world, these same men are by Vigh and Utas characterized as much more deliberate and emotionally sober in their decision to take part in armed combat. Vigh moreover argues against interpretations of recruitment wherein humiliated young men are charmed by charismatic leaders, and stresses that his respondents would mainly refer to options for social mobility when contemplating to join rebel movements (Vigh 2007, 50).

But how can the war scenarios of genital mutilation and cutting off the limbs of children from for example Rwanda and Sierra Leone be explained within such a framework? These “carnival[s] of blood” (Jean and Médecins Sans Frontières 1993, 56), seem hard to conceptualize as having anything to do with securing a livelihood. Within Utas’ ritual analysis, the atrocities taking place on the battlefield are argued to have occurred within the liminal phase of the ritual. The liminal phase of the ritual is where initiates undergo transformation, and it is marked by the suspension of everyday rules (see also Turner 1995). Utas draws on his respondents’ description of the battlefield as “a game”, as “a movie” or as “not real” (Utas 2003, 164) to argue that the form of masculinity expressed within these carnivals of blood is specific to the limited timeframe wherein combatants act out different gendered identities than they would in their everyday lives.

In the context of the Rwandan genocide, Lee Ann Fujii’s ethnography of *genocidaires* makes a comparable argument. Fujii analyzes the gradual escalation of violence to the point of highly theatrical, publicly staged murders. Men who joined the killing groups, she argues, may have initially been motivated by fear of punishment for non-compliance or by desire for profit, but as the uncertainty of

the war situation intensified, they staged killings in increasingly dramatic ways in an effort to consolidate a sense of community (Fujii 2009, 154). Backing up her interpretation, Fujii stresses that there are very few reports of sexual violence being committed by men when they were alone, and several reports of men letting people escape while they were not in the company of their killing group. The theatres of violence are just that, she argues, spectacular performances within the exceptional times of mass violence (Fujii 2009, 178). In Utas' interpretation of this kind of violence, he argues that it

is not something masculine per se, but it operates as a hegemonic mode within a militarised masculinity. Even within the rebel armies, violent masculinity manifests itself differently to generals and foot soldiers (Utas 2003, 156).

Paying closer attention to the orchestrators of violence, Utas argues that generals and other military commanders tactically aspire to produce frightening images of vulgar and supernatural masculinities in order to control their soldiers and bewilder the enemy (Utas 2003, 153). But while we may use the characterizations of Utas and Fujii to understand the spectacles of violence as occurring in exceptional times, and as being deliberately produced as something out of the ordinary, we cannot ignore that they carry distinct references to the symbolic significance of gendered identities from everyday life.

What do these exceptional performances of gendered violence tell us about the everyday dynamics of gender relations? Elisa von-Joegen Forgey uses examples from the Rwandan genocide to argue that the social structure of differently staged forms of violence deliberately directed at women and children is intimately related to their social status outside of war and conflict. She argues that the staged murders of women and children in Rwanda carried important symbolic significance in "destroying the most deeply generative unit - mothers and children" (von Joeden-Forgey 2012, 90). When women are seen as carrying the role of social reproduction in times of peace, they become targets for destruction in times of war. As exceptional as these violent expressions masculinities are, they clearly relate to the gender dynamics of everyday life, Forgey argues.

Continuing a focus on masculine identities as playing out in numerous forms as Africa's young men navigate their social circumstances, Danny Hoffman's ethnography of war in Liberia and Sierra Leone portrays "war as a violent mode of participating in today's global economy" (Hoffman 2011, 122) for young men. Hoffman argues that in contemporary West Africa, spaces, economies and social organization work to make young male bodies available for dangerous and violent work. According to the capitalist logic of surplus production, violence "becomes interchangeable with diamonds and cash, its values translated into political subjectivity and masculine identity" (Hoffman 2011, 107-108). Africa's young men are continuously mobilized different types of violence - guerilla war, the national army or private security companies, and in all these instances, they are asked to submit their bodies to violent projects in exchange for livelihood options and respected male identities. In exchange for participating in the world, Hoffman argues.

This phenomenon is also illustrated in Maya Mynster Christensen's and Cecilie Lanken Verma's ethnographies which follow former soldiers in Sierra Leone and Uganda respectively through their deployments within various violent public and private agencies (Christensen 2013; Verma 2013). The mobilization of African men into violence may be understood as an example of a global trend in the outsourcing of warfare and security operations, according to Hoffman. Masculinity is not fundamentally related to mass violence within the literature on navigating masculinities, but situationally linked to it as a consequence of global economic dynamics.

While masculinity is thus understood in more fluid terms, there is nevertheless a tendency to portray masculine identities as superior in some way. Whether it is through knowledge of warrior traditions, through abilities to seduce women, through religiosity, or through physical strength, this literature tends to understand the respected man as someone who comes out on top. It would be interesting to read examinations of masculinities at war, which inquired more into disruptions of hierarchical notions of gender. In many of these ethnographies there is room for further questioning of "the grids of intelligibility" (Butler 2004, 35), wherein masculinity is defined as the act of winning at something.

Explicitly engaging with the question of what gender roles are being produced and excluded in interpretations of violence, Maria Eriksson-Baaz and Maria Stern use their ethnography of sexual violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) to disturb how gender is thought and done in this context. Drawing up the recent political, legal and policy consensus that sexual violence is tactically used as a weapon in war, Baaz and Stern ask us to critically consider how this perspective frames our understandings of femininities and masculinities in DRC and beyond. While acknowledging the importance of recognizing that sexual violence is not simply a "side-effect" of war caused by the "formidable force" (Baaz and Stern 2013, 17) of male sexuality, they stress that attention to gender is always attached to a sexed body (Lander 2014).

Understanding sexual violence as an expression of culturally produced gender identities has emancipatory potential, Baaz and Stern argue. It gives us the hope that, "if we could do gender (read: produce masculinities) differently, then the scourge of sexual violence might disappear" (Baaz and Stern 2013, 22). Yet, the attempt to reconstruct male identities, relies heavily on the presence of biological sex - efforts for prevention are all directed at male bodies (Lander 2014). Even when gender is understood as culturally constructed, the political practices of engaging gender identities in this way differentiate between masculinity and femininity according to differences in sex. As similarly argued by Butler, such policies work to reinforce differences in gendered practices and ideas (Butler 2006). Moreover, in practice the approach often treats African masculinities as culturally backwards and in need of reeducation, which is hardly a great improvement from perceiving them as naturally backwards.

In concrete practical terms, Baaz and Stern use their case studies to argue that sexual violence is rarely planned and intended within the DRC, but may reflect

breakdowns of the military chain of command, escalated lootings or responses to soldiers' senses of being humiliated by their surrounding communities (Baaz and Stern 2013, 64). That is, sexual violence and the masculinities committing it are understood to be continuously produced and reproduced as part of how men in DRC navigate their social circumstances.

PATRIARCHIC MASCULINITIES

Moving towards more of a focus on the structures in which mass violence unfolds, certain parts of recent scholarship on masculinity and mass violence in Africa have centered their attention on patriarchic and patrimonial systems of political organization. With a focus on how the political and private institutions of peacetime structure the perpetration of mass violence, this literature argues that mass violence in Africa is shaped by patriarchy. Jean-Francois Bayart and Achille Mbembe have famously portrayed the political landscape unfolding around 'big men' in Africa (Mbembe 2001; Bayart 2009), wherein patron-client relationships organize the social dynamics of everyday life as well as times of violence.

According to Mbembe, "[t]he unconditional subordination of women to the principle of male pleasure remains one pillar upholding the phallogratic system" (Mbembe 2001, 110). The phallogratic system in Mbembe's understanding is derived from an imperial logic of domination and underlines political organization in Africa and beyond. It structures the everyday violent engagements of rulers and public servants with their subjects. Arguing that the supremacy of men in African politics causes the kinds of violence we find in African countries, Patricia Daley explains the Burundian genocide with what she terms 'the masculinized state' (Daley 2008, 61). Her argument is made succinctly by one of her respondents who argues:

"What happens is that evil comes down from the top. It is the underserving administrative staff who, in order to maintain their rank or rise to a post they covet, need 'connections', craftiness, and guile" (Daley 2008, 77).

In other words, Daley argues that the domination and oppression that produces genocide is the outcome of patriarchic organization. In Daley's characterization the masculinized state encompasses the discriminatory forms of violence against female bodies occurring every day, and genocide is but an extension of this logic. When society is organized hierarchically, as people are within the traditional family, it is ripe with the kinds of hegemonic despotisms, men within the patriarchy exercise over women, she argues. Especially African men, Daley argues, who have been forced to adopt a subordinate and marginalized masculinity under colonialism and in the international arena, construct an even more oppressive patriarchy than the Western (Daley 2008, 123). In an extension of the control the patriarch has over female sexuality within the traditional family, perpetrators of genocide function as "all powerful masculine beings [...] able to exercise control over life and death among enemy combatants and civilians" (ibid).

Since Daley is hereby arguing that African men are not naturally, but culturally prone to commit the worst kinds of violence, she is vulnerable to the critique, Baaz and Stern direct at the international response to rape in DRC. Daley's analysis of the masculinized state seems to characterize what Baaz and Stern have called "gender gone awry" (Baaz and Stern 2013, 29), where the male gender is constructed with a propensity to violence that makes men nearly inhuman. While she is blaming colonialism and imperialism for this situation, her characterization nevertheless term African men especially backwards when it comes to violence against women and other civilians. This form of argument works to identify certain sexed and raced bodies as particularly problematic, even as it stresses the contingency of this situation. In criticizing such an interpretation, I do not wish to downplay or deny that violence is being committed by men on the African continent. The aim of my critique is rather to draw attention to how our interpretations of violence work in the world to reinforce understandings of male gender identities in Africa as particularly hierarchical and prone to violence.

Women, in Daley's characterization are moreover described with a sole focus on their roles as drivers of peace and not of violence. This gendered distinction works to overshadow the many roles women have served in producing and reproducing mass violence on the African continent and beyond (see e.g. White 1990; Utas 2003).

In a slightly different vein, Forgey's characterization of the male gender aspects of genocide in Rwanda (and elsewhere) is tied to the exertion of a specifically genocidal concept of masculine power, a phenomenon she terms "genocidal masculinity" (von Joeden-Forgey 2012, 78). While the majority of perpetrators may be motivated by situational factors like fear or the promise of enrichment, Forgey argues that key instigators may be understood as expressions of deadly masculinity shaped by the global pervasiveness of patriarchy. With Daley, Forgey argues that genocidal masculinity occurs among sub-ordinated men within the patriarchic system. Under political times of crisis, such men may aspire to overthrow the old order in order to take place for themselves in a new utopia, she argues. "This creates a very specific culture that is characterized by the valorization of pure martial brutality and cold-heartedness in men" (von Joeden-Forgey 2012, 83).

Genocidal masculinity draws on the pre-existing patriarchic symbols of the traditional family structure, which gives men the central role of actors in public arenas, but with the notable difference that they are now mainly killing and mutilating. The centrality of this form of masculinity in genocides, Forgey argues, can be read from the highly gendered forms of violence taking place within them. Targeting mothers and children in efforts to destroy the "life force" (von Joeden-Forgey 2012, 92) of the community under attack is a clear illustration of the phenomenon, she argues. Thus, from having felt like sub-ordinated men within the peacetime patriarchy, men who commit genocide take revenge on the men they blame for this sub-ordination by violating their wives, daughters and sons. In patriarchic systems, this literature argues, women are during times of peace used to communicate benevolent intentions among men through marriage. During

times of war, they are again mere instruments used by men to hurt other men, the argument goes.

While Vigh, Utas, and Hoffman may be said to portray navigating masculinities, they also all include patrimonial systems as part of their characterization of how fighting takes place on the African continent. The notion of 'big men' who maintain their status as patrons through the employment of small boys to do their bidding runs through large parts of the literature on masculinity and mass violence in Africa. Hoffman quotes one of his respondents for making an explicit comparison between the role of a father and the role of a commander: "The same way I give [orders] to my son, I can give them to [my fighters]" (Hoffman 2011, 132).

Ethnographer, Mary Moran has cautioned against a tendency to use a narrow reading of the big man - small boy relationship in explanations of politics in West Africa. Patronage, she argues, is always unstable in practice and no big man is ever secure in his position (Moran 2008). Hoffman too moderates his interpretation of the role of patrimonial systems in the violence of Liberia and Sierra Leone. He argues that "while the logic of patronage runs through the story of the Mano River War, it was never a singular story" (Hoffman 2011, 137). Reading mass violence as a response to patriarchy, he argues, may work to construe war as an act of generational revenge or patricide, wherein the role of women and children is reduced to the utility they have in communications between men. When scholars who criticize the pervasiveness of patriarchy in this way intend to disturb hierarchical approaches to gender, it may work to reproduce understandings of women and children as passive in times of both peace and violence.

Parts of this literature moreover share with the literature on anxious young masculinities a focus on pathological or broken masculinity as the explanatory factor of violence. The argument that it is especially sub-ordinated men who take up arms, seems to suggest that real men who are secure in their masculinity have no such need or desire. Claudia Card has argued against interpretations of violence which use sub-ordination and humiliation to explain why men assert themselves violently, that being privileged in no way makes people less inclined to fight for what they believe they are entitled to (Card 2002). Aggression, she argues, relates to entitlement - what a person believes she or he deserves - and we have no reason to believe that powerful people do not feel entitled to their position (Card 2002, 42). On the contrary, political violence organized by colonial administrations, as well as by contemporary political actors suggest that atrocities can easily be carried out by men and women who are fighting to hold on to their position (Elkins 2005; Forges and Forges 2011).

Card's argument disturbs the notion that male feelings of inferiority cause the forms of violence seen on the African continent. She moreover directs our attention to the classed hierarchies produced by interpretations that focus on humiliation. Such a framework suggests, she argues, that the privileged are inclined to be noble, benevolent and clearheaded, whereas the sub-ordinated are

prone to chaotic and vengeful violence. It implies a form of moral superiority among privileged men, and moreover construes sexual and other forms of violence as something that belongs to the lower classes of society, rather than something that relates to gender dynamics generally (Card 2002; see also Straus 2008). From a similar kind of rationale, philosopher Gayatri Spivak has criticized gender interventions in the global south for functioning as “[w]hite men saving brown women from brown men” (Spivak 1988, 297).

It is prevalent in the empirical material presented in much of the literature on masculinity and mass violence in Africa that many of the men who have talked to various researchers about their motivations for engaging in violence refer to a desire to get a firm sense of their male identity. But when interpretations emphasize the role of such a desire in the production of violence, it may pull our attention away from numerous other aspects of why mass violence happens. When we talk about the traditional or imperially caused patriarchies of African cultures as the causes of mass violence, we take our focus away from the movements of capital that make violence possible and economically bolster certain gendered forms of political organization.

The authors of *African Conflict and Informal Power – Big Men and Networks* center their attention on exactly the gendered political economies of mass violence on the continent. With an approach to patriarchic structures as “wavering and volatile rather than [...] consolidated” (Utas 2012, 146), they argue that mass violence relates to a specific form of modern masculinized political system in African countries. As opposed to the understanding of patriarchy as a stable traditional system, the big man’s

authority is not structurally ascribed and socio-historically motivated but based on the Big Man’s ability to create a following and to a large extent dependent on his informal abilities to assist people privately (Utas 2012, 6).

Africa’s conflicts, these authors argue, can partially be understood as reflections of power struggles and attempts at enrichment between key male players on the continent. These big men did not simply inherit a stable traditional patron-client system from their forefathers, but continuously have to navigate the fluidity of political systems or they will lose their ‘bigmanity’ (Utas 2012, 12). Utas et al. are attempting a characterization of a modern form of patrimonialism inscribed in the global economy, but can hardly escape being situated in a socio-historical context. Why is it men who are big in these ethnographies rather than women? It is hard to imagine an answer that does not draw on previously existing forms of social organization, even as the systems are currently taking new shapes. The literature on patriarchic masculinities throws further light on important political and economic structures wherein female and male bodies become imbued with meaning during times of peace and violence. Yet, as with the literature on navigating masculinities, it would be interesting to see these arguments engage gendered hierarchy and difference with a view to disturbing traditional lines of thinking further.

VULNERABLE MASCULINITIES

The final part of the literature concerning masculinity and mass violence in Africa reviewed here centers on vulnerable masculinities. Masculinity is widely used to explain the perpetration of mass violence, but rarely examined as a category of vulnerability. Within major international organizations, such as the UN and the World Bank, as well as in many national policy documents, women and children are characterized as people in need of protection in a way that unarmed adult men are not (Carpenter, 2003; Dolan 2011). The categorization may be related to a classic Clausewitzian approach to studying war and violent conflict, which makes a clear separation between fighters and civilians (Clausewitz and Griffith 1997; Utas 2003; Moran 2010). Several works have sought to disrupt such a dichotomy (e.g. Nordstrom 1997; Keen 1999) and among them are studies centering on the precarious situations of men at war.

Men inside and outside of the African continent have played an overwhelming role in producing and reproducing mass violence (Kirby and Henry 2012). Consequently, these male gender issues have received a lot of scholarly and political attention. Less attention has been paid to other parts of male identities during times of violence – those wherein they are at the receiving end of violence. Men as non-combatants, refugees and internally displaced persons have been largely overlooked in studies of gender and violence, and non-heterosexual masculinities have been especially invisible (Khattab, Naujoks, and Myrntinen 2015).

Engaging male vulnerabilities in times of violence, Simon Turner's ethnography of Burundian refugees in a UNHCR (the UN refugee agency) camp in Tanzania argues that his respondents had "a fundamental fear of having [their] male identity taken by the white man" (Turner 2012, 100). The UNHCR in Tanzania worked with distinctions between vulnerable groups comprising of women, elders and children who got special distributions of food and specific non-food items (Turner 2012, 68). Adult men were excluded from these categories, and consequently had more limited opportunities of acquiring food items for themselves or their families.

"The phrase 'UNHCR is a better husband' illustrates very aptly [the] feeling that masculinity was being taken from the male refugees and appropriated by the UNHCR", Turner argues (Turner 2012, 72). Antonia Porter highlights similar issues in a comparative study of different African post-conflict scenarios (Porter 2013). Within these volatile situations men have highly limited economic opportunities. When they are moreover recovering from trauma, men emerge from conflict with their masculinities "deeply wounded" (Porter 2013, 492), she argues. War as a deeply emasculating experience for men is a concern that is increasingly brought to the fore in contemporary research on gender and mass violence (Carpenter 2002; Foster 2011; Khattab, Naujoks, and Myrntinen 2015). Illustrating this phenomenon, Desiree Lwambo's report on male victims of sexual violence in DRC quotes one of her respondents for saying that "before the war, I was a man" (Lwambo 2011, 14).

There is something compelling about these efforts to throw more light on vulnerable masculinities, but at the same time several of these studies carry problematic implications. Lwambo and Porter both argue that many aspects of war threaten male identities. When men experience violence, when they become passive recipients of aid and when other men forcefully control their bodies, they are made to feel weak and feminized, so the argument goes (Lwambo 2011; Porter 2013; see also Carpenter 2002). But why should it be especially problematic for men to feel powerless and more acceptable for women? When it is highlighted that a man is no longer a man when he has been raped, is it suggested that a woman remains a woman regardless of the violence she is exposed to? And if it is, what does it say about our everyday understandings of feminine gender identities when we treat them as if they are not threatened by being subjected to violence? The special attention paid to men losing their gendered identity through humiliation, carries the problematic suggestion that humiliation fits better within the frame of female gender identities.

While I argue against uncritically treating feminizing violence as if it is harder on men than on women, the literature on vulnerable masculinities brings our attention to the paradoxes at work in the gendered security regimes of the UN and many other political actors. As highlighted by Turner, men are within UNHCR refugee camps and many other places fixed as domestically irresponsible, and at the same time their options for fulfilling a traditional male gender role within conflicts and post-conflict settings are extremely limited. Men are by various international agencies not trusted with socially reproductive responsibilities, such as taking their children to health clinics, but nor do they have the option of contributing to their families' wellbeing by providing for them financially (Moran 2010; Turner 2012). This literature invites us to think critically about how conceptualizations of gender identities work in the world through the political programs they inspire to reinforce ideas about what women and men can do.

Outside of refugee camps, Chris Dolan has in his ethnography of conflict in Northern Uganda drawn attention to how the reduced ability of men to embrace alternative and non-violent masculine identities during conflict is a vulnerability in itself (Dolan 2011). Under situations of internal displacement and military occupation men are often forcefully recruited into militias or subjected to mass killings specifically targeting men and boys as means to prevent rebellion, he argues. Baaz and Stern have followed this line of critique and moreover argued that the intense focus on DRC as the "rape capital of the world" (Baaz and Stern 2013, 5) has removed focus from how women and men are also vulnerable in a number of other ways due to the conflict. Being recruited into forced labor, being subjected to mass lootings and abductions are also conditions which make female and male lives precarious in DRC, yet the UN relief policies center primarily on rape of women by men.

Such policies ignore the significant numbers of men and boys in conflict societies who do not take up arms (Wright 2014). The Rwandan genocide became infamous for the wide degree of participation in killings (see e.g. Gourevitch 1998; Hatzfeld and Sontag 2005). Historian Mahmood Mamdani has gone so far as to argue that

“the truth is that everybody participated, at least all men” (Mamdani 2002, 5). Yet, in going over the available statistical material, Nigel Eltringham has pointed out that the highest existing estimation charges ca. 700,000 hutus for genocidal murders, a number that in 1994 constituted around 10% of the adult hutu population (Eltringham 2004, 69). Cases like these have led Alana Foster to argue that international interpretations and responses to war and mass violence often imply that as soon as a man is battle age, he is neither innocent nor vulnerable (Foster 2011). In this way, non-combatant men are obscured from reference, and the many adult men who, like women and children, are equally exposed to violence remain marginalized in academia, policy and practice (Foster 2011; Moran 2010).

The critique of viewing all battle age men as candidates for violence may be related to that of scholars arguing against understanding Africa as a continent covered by violence. In historical, political and social scientific imagination, as well as in contemporary media representation, Africa as a whole has tendentially been associated with violence (Ahluwalia, Bethlehem, and Ginio 2007). Violence as a defining trope for Africa, is according to Mbembe related to how the West’s engagement with the continent has proceeded on the basis that Africans are not fully human. Africans, he argues, are associated with bestiality, strangeness and monstrosity in the West’s conceptual and practical engagements with them (Mbembe 2001, 2). The tendency to overlook that mass violence on the African continent occurs in limited geographical regions, may be compared to the tendency to ignore the many non-combatant men in those regions. It relates to an imperially inspired approach to the continent, wherein its inhabitants are generally considered prone to violence and savage chaos.

Other parts of the literature on vulnerable masculinities draw our attention to the forms of sexual violence directed at male bodies. Centering her critique on the UN gender mainstreaming policies, Paula Drumond follows Dolan, Lwambo, Baaz and Stern in highlighting the issue of male victims of rape (Drumond 2012). Drumond too engages sexual violence in DRC, and criticizes the lack of statistical figures accounting for the number of “[i]nvisible males” (Drumond 2012, 96) who have been raped. Dolan argues that while there has been repeated documentations of widespread rapes of men in Uganda and Congo, there is a tendency for male victims not to report them, as they fear accusations of homosexuality (Dolan 2011; see also Myrntinen, Naujoks, and El-Bushra 2014).

Finally, Baaz and Stern highlight how being forced to rape family members or others is a form of gender based violence to which the UN pays no attention (Baaz and Stern 2013; see also Drumond 2012). Drumond goes so far as to argue that it is conceptually impossible for men to seek redress for harms suffered through rape. That is, UN agencies define their mission with regards to rape as that of ensuring “protection and access to care and justice for women and children [...] including approaches to change the attitudes and behavior of young people and men” (cf. Drumond 2012, 105). By definition, men are within this policy approach in need of having their violent tendencies controlled, and only women and children are considered vulnerable.

WHAT TO THINK OF MASCULINITIES AND MASS VIOLENCE NOW?

Drummond's UN quote aptly illustrates how the ways in which gender identities of women and men are conceptualized have far-reaching consequences for the practical distributions of food, care, violence, and justice within conflict situations. By being attentive to implied assumptions about masculinity and mass violence in African countries, we may better direct critiques and political action against sexual violence and other violent actions committed by women and men during times of war. We may moreover engage with how our interpretations of masculinities in Africa work to reinforce differences in ideas and practices concerning women and men on the continent.

This working paper has drawn up a number of debates, concepts and tendencies in some of the literature linking male gender identities to the forms of violence carried out in recent conflicts on the African continent. The intention of the paper is to highlight and question analytical trends, rather than provide answers about how masculinities are produced and reproduced in violent settings. Instead of arguing in defense of a certain way of understanding masculinity and mass violence, I have argued that however we understand these concepts and their relation to each other, we need to be analytically aware of the political implications of our ideas as well as their colonial and imperial legacies. As attention to the gendered dynamics of mass violence is growing, so is our need to critically engage the framing of gender in academia and policy. It is clear that research and political practices directed at masculinities on the African continent is multifaceted and continuously transforming in these years. I hope that this working paper has provided useful insights into some of the ongoing debates and opened up a space for questioning the underlying assumptions about masculinity they contain.

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