



**The Central Margins  
Congo's Transborder Economy and  
State-Making in the Borderlands**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper explores the connections between cross border trade, armed rebellion, and state making in the borderland of North Kivu province (eastern Democratic Republic of Congo) and Kasese (Western Uganda) during the recent war to peace transition (1990's-2003). Rather than collapsed statehood and economic development-in-reverse, the author argues that the interdependencies and accumulation strategies developed during Congo's protracted crisis have gradually made this borderland a crucial pillar in the equilibrium forces between formal and informal, state and non state actors and regulations in this territorial periphery – which has subsequently become a central margin in today's regional processes of state formation.

## INTRODUCTION

This paper deals with the border region between Congo and Uganda, specifically the territories of Beni-Lubero and the district of Kasese, in Africa's Great Lakes region. In mainstream accounts, this region often calls up images from Joseph Conrad's classic novel *Heart of Darkness*: a remote borderland besieged by predatory and armed men, where death arrives suddenly and unexpectedly. For years, the eastern Congolese borderlands have been overrun by armed warfare, involving both local militias and foreign armies in a complex conflict over power and resources. Summing up Conrad's image, most people prefer to describe Congo's borderland as a perversion of economic development, where criminal gangs and looting militias have taken over from benign or liberal statehood. A recent UN report, for example, describes the economic outlook in eastern Congo as an endemic case of state collapse, where "illegal" cross-border practices such as arms trafficking and the smuggling of natural resources are more the rule than the exception, and both official and non-official actors display a great disrespect for existing state regulations (UN 2005). This defiance is especially visible in the border localities on the Congo-Ugandan border, where I spent about eight years doing fieldwork for projects including my doctoral dissertation (Raeymaekers, 2007).

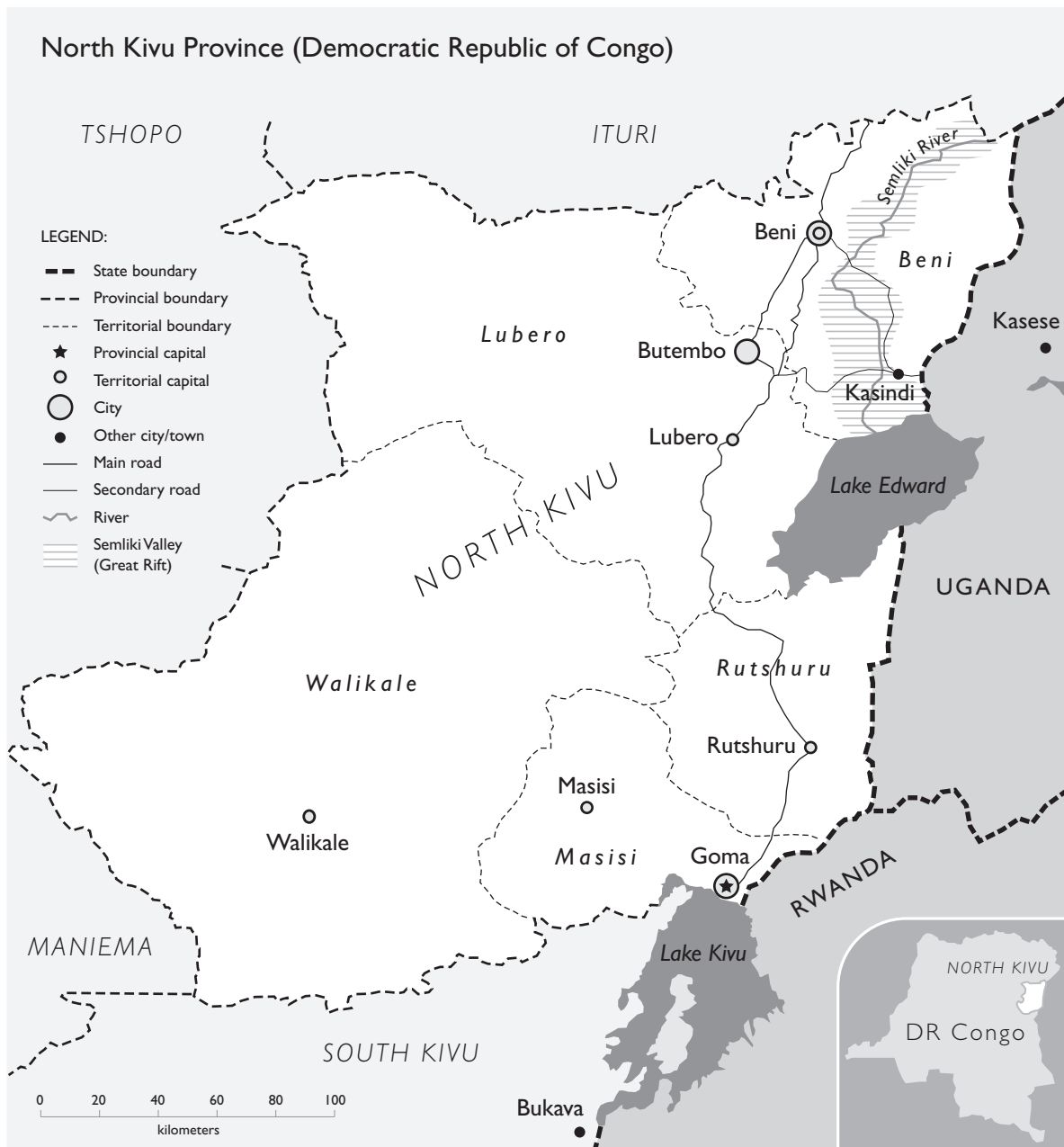
Two perspectives currently dominate the debate on unofficial economic activities in the context of protracted armed conflicts. The first, a liberal perspective, prefers to describe such activities as a distortion of "rational" economic rules, dominated by free-riding and predation. The underlying idea is that the consequences of war in developing countries are always negative:

while they provide limited opportunities for "those who are willing to take the risk" (Collier, 1999; Collinson, 2003), the bulk of citizens continue to suffer from a lack of overarching state authority and 'good governance'. A second, Marxist perspective, describes unofficial trade as a form of opposition to predatory and unaccountable statehood. Border zones like eastern Congo could be compared in this regard to "spaces of avoidance" (Scott, 2000), where communities hiding from state obligations such as taxes and forced labour openly resist the state's project of sedenterisation, extraction and simplification. The network economies developed in these areas are consequently described as expressions of "alternative" political projects, which crystallise around the key concepts of autarchy, self-subsistence and (trans) local economic "development".

Both perspectives offer a distorted view of socio-economic reality in Africa's crisis zones. While the first effectively misses the hold that political power has over people – whose pursuits often go way beyond narrow economic rationality (Cramer, 2006: 137), the second starts from an artificial dichotomy between "official" and "unofficial", "state" and "society" in such rapidly transforming contexts. There are indeed good reasons to question the black-and-white picture of unruly subjects against sedentarising and predatory states when it comes to Africa's many border zones. As I will demonstrate further, analysis of economic activity on the Congo-Ugandan border actually shows a great deal of complicity and overlap between "public" state officials and "private" citizens both during and after colonial occupation. The more or less symbiotic relationship generated in daily face-to-face relations on the border has stimulated the emergence

of interdependent livelihoods as well as a gradual transformation of existing political and economic regulations that goes beyond the linear politics of subversion and oppression. As Paul Nugent states in a similar argument, the practices of everyday life at the borders have in many cases been fundamental to the constitution of power, notably by working on state institutions, community re-

lations, and basic concepts of political space (Nugent, 2002: 232). Their particular role in the historical development of nation-states makes it worthwhile to study borderlands as separate socio-cultural systems that remain nonetheless intertwined with larger national and regional processes of political making and unmaking (see also Donnan and Wilson, 1999).





The argument developed in this paper rests on two suggestions. First, I believe that the practices of cross-border trade and economic regulation provide a unique insight into the ways that apparently powerless subjects constantly outwit the state, and by outwitting it gradually transform it. These practices, which are driven by the “subtle, stubborn, resistant activity of groups which (...) have to get along in a network of already established forces and representations” (de Certeau, 1984: 18; Migdal and Schlichte, 2005) occur in the constant enmeshment and pluralisation of norms and rules that characterise this African borderland, and where “the” state is only one among many forces striving for a legitimate monopoly over the means of force. Contrary to other marginal spaces within states, the border generates particular opportunities that push states to mediate, rather than impose, political authority<sup>1</sup>. In the border locality of Kasindi, for example (see map), the regulation of economic practice is in fact negotiated constantly: from the taxes paid to customs agents, to the security in and around commercial markets, to the petrol delivered to underpaid military troops. Instead of a clear state-society divide, authority at the border occurs in a mixed dress, and formal rules constantly enmesh with informal, or unofficial, regulations. One distinction that reflects this political ambivalence, for example, is that between legal state authorities (*autorités légalement reconnues*) and actual authorities (*autorités de fait*), or the various non-state

<sup>1</sup> An interesting differentiation in this respect is that between frontiers and ghettos (Ron, 2003) which, although both “peripheral” to a certain extent, attract different regimes of violence on the part of nation-states. Contrary to Ron, however, I argue that the crucial function of international borders in terms of socio-economic redistribution, territoriality and representation can generate different “border effects”, going from violent imposition to state mediation to administrative and institutional innovation.

agents such as armed bandits, rural militias, NGOs, and transnational businessmen, who regularly assume local political powers. In this fluid institutional landscape, people also constantly change roles. It is not uncommon, for example, to meet a state official who becomes a coffee smuggler or petty trader at night; nor to see customs agents socialising with sellers of illegal DVDs. In Congo, this *straddling* along different social and political arenas is termed *débrouillardisme*: it harbours the constant capacity of individuals and groups to “fend for themselves”, whereby the means – to steal, corrupt, extort, collude, embezzle, bribe – increasingly comes to justify the ends of physical survival (Trefon, 2002: 488).

Two remarks should be added for the sake of clarity. On the one hand, it should be noted that these changing livelihood options or social roles are not at all interpreted as contradictory by the agents that embody them, but rather form part of a coherent livelihood system. Perhaps *straddling* is a good term to describe such activities since this supposes people to have their feet firmly planted in both “formal” and “informal” spheres (or what we describe as “formal” and “informal” spheres). According to Janet Roitman, the concept of straddling is an important corrective to the state-society opposition:

The image of the African producer with one foot in the formal and the other in the informal, lifting left and right alternatively, is misleading in that, although straddling involves dispersing risk by balancing alternative types of resources, the extent to which various productive relationships form a system, as opposed to a set of alternatives from which one chooses, is often overlooked (...) What is conceptually disconcerting is that this stance is seemingly contradictory. But if the formal and informal constitute an entire system of production, distribution, and ex-

change (and not two separate spheres), there is no inconsistency to be resolved. The theoretical presuppositions (be they Weberian or Marxist) that condemn our understanding of such seemingly contradictory or multifaceted situations to ‘stages’ and ‘transitions’ of some sort of development are, perhaps, what require resolution. (Roitman, 1990: 685).

On the other hand, it should be emphasised that fraud – or the outwitting of official customs regulation – does not happen in neglect of state agencies, but rather in connivance with *certain* state agents and *certain* regulatory bodies in neglect or opposition to others. As Ellis and MacGaffey (1996) suggest, unofficial transborder trade in Africa is by nature difficult to detect, and what is usually described as “informal”, “hidden”, “parallel”, or “underground” economic activity may indeed involve a wide range of degrees of formality and illegality. Fraudulent imports and exports in the borderland actually occur in compliance with, and in some cases are even driven by, state agents that are trying to make a living. One of these partially legal trade activities is the trade in coffee beans, traditionally one of North Kivu’s most important export crops. While being extracted and recorded regularly in Congolese records, the crop is smuggled illegally across the Ugandan border for reasons of economic profit: because of Uganda’s favourable export regime, Congolese coffee commands a much higher price from its western neighbour (Raeymaekers, 2006). The result is that eastern Congolese coffee is commonly sold as Ugandan produce on international markets. The same system applies to exports of vanilla, cocoa and other precious cash crops, whose exports remain under the protection of usurping customs agents as well as armed actors that systematically operate as private security agents for cross-border traders.

This constant enmeshment and collaboration between state and non-state agencies in the Congolese-Ugandan borderland suggests that in the theoretical margins of state penetration, the constant face-to-face engagement of people and communities in cross-border practices and regulations can potentially generate more “long-standing solidarities” (Bratton, 1989) that not only give shape to new occupational and class identities, but can eventually realign existing power relations (including the state). Instead of immediately celebrating such arrangements as novel and hybrid types of governance, however, they force us to ask some particularly pressing questions about the drivers of structural social change. What seems necessary in the current analysis, therefore, is to see how such constellations and networks reformulate and reconfigure social order and authority in a given context, and in what form (Callaghy et al., 2001: 278). This includes a thorough analysis of the different regimes of violence that determine the relationships between “formal” and “informal”, official and unofficial agencies and regulatory systems.

A second argument developed in this paper is that the analysis of cross-border smuggling remains crucial, not only to explain the relationship between state and society, “formal” and “informal” rule systems, but also between historical modes of economic production. The livelihoods that are generated at the border are never purely subsistence-oriented, but should be seen in connection to wider forms of production and capital accumulation integrated in a (global) capitalist market economy. A central concern of our analysis, therefore, should be who exactly captures the economic surpluses, and what kinds of surplus appropriations are being actively or passively legitimised. Whereas the unfolding of capitalist modes of production might indeed

open up certain freedoms for certain people (for example in terms of property rights, investment and accumulation opportunities), such freedoms are often also forced on people, and “crisis” – be it termed political, armed conflict or otherwise – can sometimes create an enabling environment for such extra-economic pressures and transformations (Cramer, 2006: 213). We ought to understand, therefore, how the – often violent and extra-economic – appropriation schemes that accompany “informal” economic practices remain inscribed in the same logical (or epistemological) order as that of the contemporary nation-state, or contrarily generate new patterns of production and accumulation. Next to the governmentality of regulatory practices in the borderland (Roitman, 2005), this requires a more thorough understanding of the interconnection between “formal” and “informal” modes of production, consumption and accumulation and its relation to capitalist enterprise.

In the following sections, I will analyse this interconnection between different logics and patterns of accumulation in Congo-Uganda’s borderland economy, first during the colony and then during the post-colony and war years (respectively 1960-1997 and 1996-2003). The emphasis will remain on the current period of war and post-war, which has been characterised by a gradual transposition of existing productive and regulatory relations.

## **A POLITICAL ECONOMY OF THE BORDERLAND**

Although the evidence is still largely anecdotal, there are good reasons to believe that transboundary practices on the Congo-Ugandan border significantly shaped (or at least bent) official state politics during the colonial

period. To the northeast in West Nile, the British called the Lugbara “a rather difficult tribe to tame” (Leopold, 2005: 82). Up until the First World War, the region practically remained a free-for-all zone infested by a “riff-raff” of ivory hunters, adventurers, renegade soldiers and colonial government employees, where crime generally went unpunished. While border stations existed, they were generally unfortified and administered only nominally. This naturally opened up a whole series of opportunities for smuggling, trading and private racketeering in the larger Western Nile region, not least by “adventurous” colonials who were out for a quick profit. As Gillian Mathys rightly observes, what is often forgotten in contemporary accounts on African mobility is that indigenous inhabitants were often trying to escape forced labour and taxation: “[p]ush- and pull factors, such as different political and cultural contexts, different regimes of taxation, wage differences, land grants et cetera, brought about by the colonial partition of the region and the instilment of different colonial administrations; but also other factors such as overpopulation, had an impact on the existence, intensity and direction of migratory flows.” She proposes that the idea of the *‘Bula Matari’*, or the epitome of the all-encompassing colonial state, be abandoned as it reflected the colonial officers’ wish about how they wanted the colonial state to be perceived rather than actual day-to-day relationships at the border (Mathys, 2010: 1-2; see also Berman, 1997; Herbst, 2000).

On the Congolese side of the border, the “push and pull” factors for cross-border activity were provided mainly by the Belgian introduction, in the 1920s, of a mercantilist economic system based on monopolistic retail trade from the countryside, as well as regime of unfree labour that forcefully sent indigenous subjects to work in the gold and

tin mines, or on the tea and coffee plantations of the Kivu region. Parallel to other African colonies, different transnational companies started to act as government proxies in their imposition of a “liberal” but forceful political and economic regime on Congo’s rich mineral and agricultural hinterland; they subsequently became a “disruptive force” that gradually destroyed the social cohesion of the small-scale political units that were penetrated through trade and military occupation (Reno, 2004: 611). Politically, the region west of the Semliki river and its Nande inhabitants<sup>2</sup> were ruled by a “trinity” of a small colonial administration, a number of international companies and the local Catholic and Protestant missions. Within this setting, the economic component of colonial rule gradually became more important as Congo essentially served as a provider of raw resources for Western markets. In North Kivu, for example, one single company, the *Minière des Grands Lacs*, became owner of over one third of today’s territories of Beni and Lubero – the heart of the Congo-Ugandan borderland. To feed the masses of workers in these mines and on the plantations, an oligopoly of international companies was established that bought up and resold local produce. This had the double effect of stimulating local production and forcing local villagers into the cash economy. An important cash crop during the colonial period, for example, was coffee, which rose spectacularly from 10.720 to 38.070 tonnes between 1935-1940; meanwhile, the local gold production in these years rose from 3.905,200 to 6.270 ounces between 1937 and 1940 (Vwakyanakazi, 1982).

<sup>2</sup> Technically one should speak about the Yira people (Ba-Yira), who remained dispersed after of the imposition of the colonial boundary between Congo and Uganda at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Currently one speaks of Congolese Banande and Ugandan Bakonzo (Remotti, 1993). The Nande live in the *territoires* of Beni and Lubero, in Congo’s province of North Kivu.

Although theoretically, this mercantile model remained closed for colonial subjects – in fact no one could access the “indigenous” milieu for commercial reasons unless carrying official colonial documentation<sup>3</sup> – it becomes increasingly evident that these colonial technologies stood open for negotiation. Several Nande petty traders, some of whom demonstrated a particularly heated attitude against the imperial regime, gradually succeeded in breaking this colonial wall of discrimination. One man that became progressively integrated in the colonial political economy, for example, was ‘Yusuf’ Kibangu<sup>4</sup>. Kibangu probably started his business in the 1920s, trading in fish and salt from Uganda. At the lake in Katwe, he became a member of a fish vendors association that introduced him to the Sunni belief system (whereafter he changed his name to Yusuf). Initially, Kibangu worked as a driver for the *‘Minière de Grands Lacs’* (cf. supra), but after a row with the directorship he was fired. Another sign of his oppositional character was his denouncement of colonial abuses close to his home town Butembo, where colonial doctors were said to deliberately “kill” local patients. Notwithstanding these open accusations, Kibangu was saved personally from prison by a colonial officer turned businessman in the 1950s, who fixed him the necessary documents to continue his transborder trade<sup>5</sup>. After Kibangu, a whole generation of

<sup>3</sup> According to a colonial decree of 9 December 1925, this document was obtained only after having provided proof of being able to measure up to European standards such as maintaining a proper bookkeeping system and being fluent in at least one European language (Mirembe, 2002: 117).

<sup>4</sup> The following information originates in separate and collective interviews with Kibangu’s son, his brother-in-law and his grandson, all residents of Butembo (October 2006).

<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, this man was referred to as a “member of the Belgian royal family” by Kibangu’s son. After defending Kibangu’s case, he apparently offered him a document permitting Kibangu to engage in transborder commerce and construct a market shop in the centre of Butembo’s ‘*cité*’.

indigenous traders set up shop in the Semliki border area, where they continued to buy up local agricultural produce to sell to eastern Congo's urban masses. Even though they were not directly helped by colonial officials, they still benefited from the presence of expat traders and Baptist ministers, who often employed them as commercial middlemen. Many local traders in fact accumulated their first capital by acting as middlemen for these European expat traders<sup>6</sup>.

Rather than assuming an oppositional role, therefore, local traders in the Congo-Ugandan borderland grafted themselves on the colonial model of unfree labour and urban-rural divisions to become eastern Congo's new commercial power brokers. Although based on creativity and innovation, their activities sharply reflected the divisions of colonial society by reconfirming and enhancing the economic and political exploitation of the rural masses. According to Vwakyanakazi (1982: conclusion), "the innovation of Butembo traders is rooted in social adaptation: profoundly influenced by the social roots in which this phenomenon emerged, informal trading is increasingly seen as an alternative economic and social solution to the living conditions in remote geographical and social peripheral areas. At the same time, it is likely to persist because it essentially thrives on [the] social divisions that characterize this peripheral society". Consequently, the position of

these transnationals seemed more similar to economic brokers, who "stand guard over the crucial junctures or synapses of relationships which connect the local system to the larger whole" (Wolf, 1966). By introducing a logic of transnationalism in Congo's countryside, they actually facilitated its capitalist penetration through the enhancement of monetization, marketization and – above all – the capitalist economic mobility that was introduced so forcefully during colonial occupation. In the following decades, this position of Butembo's traders – as local inhabitants with transnational connections, or mobile subjects with local social roots – would become crucial in their assumption of more pro-active political roles during the post-colonial period.

## INDEPENDENCE: VEGETABLES WITHOUT BORDERS

The weakening of Congo's political system immediately after colonial independence in 1960 automatically led to the collapse of the compulsory production system of cash and food crops embodied in the colonial "trinity" of Church, state and commerce (Vwakyanakazi, 1982: 155-164). With independence, all stations of the *Minière des Grands Lacs*<sup>7</sup> were closed, which led to a drastic reduction of oligopolistic retail trade. This immediately generated a number of opportunities for the indigenous traders who had positioned themselves on the nodes of eastern Congo's rural-urban divide. On the one hand, the decreasing levels of state control on the border greatly stimulated cross-border smuggling. During the immediate post-independence years, all sorts of agricultural and other products were carried across the border to be sold on Ugandan markets. A UN officer that was posted at the border crossing in Kasindi at the time

<sup>6</sup> Another interesting angle to this discussion is the question of whether or not these Baptist missions introduced a "Protestant" work ethic in the Congolese borderland. While they certainly helped the Nande's emerging transnational "trust network" – many of today's important traders in fact come from the same village that was home to an American Baptist mission – the Nande enterprise remains mostly characterized by a mixture (of capitalist and non-capitalist modes of production, "modern" and "traditional", local and transnational values and cultures) rather than a linear evolution from organic to mechanical solidarity (for a discussion see Mirembe, 2005; Raeymaekers, 2007).



saw several caravans of carriers reinforced by armed warriors, making their way to the Ugandan border to deliver agricultural products (Willame, 1972: 28; Vwakyanakazi, 1982: 160). On the other hand, the growing insecurity in the countryside produced a favourable climate for inland trading, albeit indirectly: due to repeated attacks by armed bandits and local militias in the countryside, the urban population in North Kivu rocketed, which resulted in growing levels of subsistence trade and the opening of several boutiques (*'kabu-tike'*) in the cities. After the Mulelist rebellion in 1965-66 (see Van Acker and Vlassenroot, 2000), the region west of the Semliki saw the rise of various commercial middlemen, who specialized in channelling cash and food crops from the producing peasants to the starving urban centres of Butembo, Beni and other eastern Congolese cities. In the Lubero highland, for example, a local company called *'Légumes Sans Frontières'* (Vegetables without Borders) would supply cabbages and onions from the highlands to the capital Kinshasa on a weekly basis. During the 1980s, an airplane would travel twice a week to Kinshasa with vegetables from the Lubero highlands.

In hindsight, therefore, the double opportunity of withering state authority and insecurity at its margins had generated the foundations of a vast network of trading relationships that was informed and forwarded by the same hierarchy of producing peasants, intermediary traders and unproductive urban centres that had characterized the days of colonial retail trade. As a result, the Lubero highlands started to look increasingly similar to other exploited rural hinterlands on the African continent, where peasants were busy providing the urban dwellers with food, but were not always able to feed themselves (Dickie, 2004; Cramer, 2006). Parallel to other African rural markets, traders increasingly

tied local producers to the market through a system of credit and debt, while the latter's purchasing power was progressively eroded by the import of expensive household products. During the post-independence years, the same traders that connected the Congolese hinterland to the urban centres became increasingly engaged in the import of household products and other economic necessities from East African and Asian industries. As a result, a veritable smuggling economy emerged during the 1970s and 80s that connected border markets such as Aru and Ariwara on the border with Sudan, Butembo and Kasindi towards Uganda and Goma and Bukavu on the Rwandan border to larger cities in Kenya, Tanzania and finally even East Asia. According to Janet MacGaffey (1987; 1991), this cross-border economy contributed to no small extent to the formation of an independent entrepreneurial class in eastern Congo, which apparently stood in opposition to a "parasitic" and predatory state administration, but in reality lived on the same exploitative divisions that had characterized the colonial and post-colonial economic systems.

A final dimension where this enmeshment of formal and informal modes of appropriation became apparent was in the acquisition of local land titles. During the so-called Bakajika land reform (1968-1973), large tracts of private land titles and plantations in the Kivu region became theoretically nationalised in the hands of the Mobutist administration. This land reform theoretically made part of Mobutu's Zairianisation measures, which declared all land (and what was underneath it in terms of mineral and other wealth) property of the state. In practice, however, this reform rapidly set in motion a massive appropriation process which was driven by the "reciprocal assimilation" of rural capitalists – largely made up of transnational bulk traders – customary

landlords, and a corrupt local administration (Mafikiri Tsongo, 1994). As a result, peasant and other destitute households had no other option than to throw themselves into petty (transborder) commerce, which had already become the region's second most important economic activity. During the 1980s, apparently every layer of society became involved in such "informal" trade activities, from the local police and *gendarmérie* to army soldiers, Zairian and foreign businessmen, and finally also peasants (Callaghy, 1984: 284). At the end of the decade, the capital generated by this rural and cross-border trade would slowly start to trickle down, probably mostly despite, and not because of, the embeddedness of transnational traders in their local rural milieu: toward the 1990s, peasants started to set up credit associations and co-operatives that finally gave them a chance to overcome their historical relations of poverty and marginalisation toward the unproductive Congolese cities.

To summarize, the case of Beni-Lubero's traders convincingly demonstrates that informal economic activity such as petty trade and cross-border smuggling does not necessarily have to occur in opposition to ruling political or economic regimes. Contrary to the dominant school of thought, which describes informal entrepreneurship as a "silent" revolution (Vwakyanakazi, 1982; MacGaffey, 1987, 1991; De Soto, 2000), Butembo's traders were actually very similar to a classic merchant capitalist class, or "a social group that was torn between its interest in appropriating agricultural surpluses on its own account and its interests in gaining access to rents and wealth mobilized by the state" (Boone, 1992: 255). Very similar to the Senegalese case Boone describes, this reproduction of the existing economic model in eastern Congo was based on three interrelated processes that could be

summarized as (1) clientelism; (2) subsistence agriculture and (3) a combination of rentier and primitive accumulation. Without engaging too deeply in this discussion (for more detail, see the excellent analyses of Callaghy, 1984 and Schatzberg, 1988), it was clear that the underdevelopment of Congo's economic system derived in great part from the inability of the state to mobilize resources beyond private or clientelistic networks. Likewise, the accumulating class had no direct means of organizing or intensifying production since it found great benefit in simply exploiting urban-rural divisions while occasionally seeking "protection" from the state in terms of property titles or direct profits. While Congolese peasants would largely remain tied to their means of production through debt and subsistence agriculture, the future transformation of economic relations would arrive from a rather different direction, namely from the engagement of transnational traders in local governance and primitive accumulation. This engagement would become especially evident during the war years, when eastern Congo became part of a regional conflict complex involving both political and economic actors and dimensions. These dimensions will be discussed in the following section, which deals with the first and second Congo Wars (1996-97; 1998-2003).

## THE WAR AS PLURALIZING MOMENT

In 1996, Congo (then still called Zaire) quickly became part of a regional war complex that was driven by both internal and external causes. For insiders, however, the war had not come all that suddenly, as the simmering land question of the 1980s (cf. *supra*) had already ignited a small civil war in the east of the coun-

try<sup>7</sup>. With the arrival of more than a million refugees from Rwanda and Burundi after the Rwandan genocide, this smouldering conflict took on a much larger dimension. In 1996-97, Laurent Kabila led a coalition of Congolese and foreign troops to Kinshasa, where he unseated Mobutu from power. Once in power, however, Kabila was immediately confronted with yet another rebellion from its eastern provinces that rapidly fragmented along ethnicized and territorial lines. From 1998 onwards, the country was carved up in different rebel strongholds that gradually took on the form of mini- or quasi-states (Tull, 2003). The Lusaka peace agreement (1999), which was meant to install a ceasefire observed by a United Nations peacekeeping force, did nothing to stop this process of fragmentation, but on the contrary consolidated the regional component of the war. Especially during the “second” Congo war (1998-2003), Congolese rebels and foreign army officers systematically exploited and exported natural resources like diamonds, coltan<sup>8</sup> and other minerals out of the country, often with the complicity of Congolese political authorities and economic “elite” networks (UN, 2001, 2002). The increasingly transboundary character of the Congo war – at least six African countries and as many rebel groups were involved in it – ultimately assigned it the epithet of Africa’s “First World War”.

<sup>7</sup> The beginning of the Congo war actually forms part of a larger discussion about underlying causes. While some claim that the conflict started with the regionalization of the Rwandan genocide (Lemarchand, 1997, 2001), others suggest that the civil war actually started earlier, with the introduction of democratic political competition during the years of the political “transition” (Vlassenroot, 2002). For a deeper discussion, see Raeymaekers and Vlassenroot (2004).

<sup>8</sup> Coltan (colombo-tantalite) is a metal ore used in microchips and the aviation/spatial industry. For a discussion of coltan in relation to the Congo war, see Cuvelier and Raeymaekers (2002a-b) and Raeymaekers (2002). On the political economy of coltan extraction in Eastern Congo see also Mantz (2008).

To some extent, this unfolding regional conflict could be described as a continuation of violence by other means (Cramer, 2006). On the one hand, the war in the Great Lakes region contributed to some fundamental political changes, which not unsurprisingly started off from the borderlands. During the war, a variety of power configurations emerged in the Congo-Ugandan border area that exercised an increasingly decisive influence on state building projects in the region, particularly in Museveni’s Uganda. One example involved the emerging power configuration in Ituri, where a series of powerful Ugandan army generals (among them Museveni’s brother-in-law Salim Saleh), local political elites and transnational businessmen found an equilibrium of interests based on monopolistic trade, an unfree labour regime and exclusionist political rule (Vlassenroot and Raeymaekers, 2004; Veit, 2007). Rather than some genocidal outpost, therefore, the Ituri conflict formed a well-developed example of a “network war”, which rapidly started working beyond the conventional competences of territorially defined governments. In Duffield’s words, “such wars not only radically blur and dissolve the conventional distinctions between peoples, armies and governments, they are also forms of adaptation to the effects of market deregulation and the qualification and attenuation of nation-state competence” (Duffield, 2001).

On the other hand, however, it should be noted that this networked response to decreasing state power also went hand in hand with a rapid penetration of “capitalist” markets and logics. Although it would be exaggerated to call the Congo wars a conspiracy against the peasants, it goes without saying that they immediately lost the modest emancipation they had gained during the pre-war years. War also forced peasants to be more



mobile, as the constant insecurity and army attacks on the countryside made many of them either refugees or IDPs. During the war years, these mobile subjects increasingly created a labour surplus for the exploitation of mining sites and in transborder trade: literally thousands of youngsters and families moved from insecure rural areas to the borders or mining areas where some modicum of security was still guaranteed by the occupying armies and militias. A peculiar relationship thus developed, in which armed actors drove these floating populations into permanent unfree labour while simultaneously “protecting” them from external threats<sup>9</sup>. At the same time, a new group of transnational businessmen gained economic and political strength as a result of this violent capitalist penetration. Especially during the second Congo war (1998-2003), Ugandan businessmen protected by their own army generals established a lucrative *modus vivendi* with Congolese traders and armed warriors to systematically channel cash crops like coffee and vanilla, but also timber, gold and diamonds, to markets in their home country (Perrot, 1999). In Kasese and Kampala, new enterprises were even erected to process the timber that arrived in great quantities from the Congolese forest. As can be read from Uganda’s gold exports, amongst others (Fahey, 2009), the violent occupation of eastern Congo was not just an individual military adventure but formed a structural part of a regional market integration that was not official in the narrow sense of the word, but was certainly driven by state interests. This observation fits with the dominant explanation of Uganda’s in-

volvement in eastern Congo, which explains it as part of Museveni’s “regime security”. According to Clark, “the extraction of resources from Congo might simply be part of a programme to keep Museveni in power, rather than one of genuine state-building” (Clark, 2001: 277-278). This suggests, as Clarke points out, that the Ugandan army was actually engaged in criminal activity that did not benefit the Ugandan state or people at large, but rather rewarded and reinforced its loyalty through the free hand Museveni gave them to “plunder” a foreign country’s national riches.

On the Congolese side the story was a bit more complex. Rather than a mere looting economy based on extraction and predation, the restructuring of economic relationships during the war led to a gradual reconfiguration of local polities in a way that worked to the benefit of local power brokers, i.e. the different “men of prowess” that mediated power between the state and the non-state, official and unofficial sectors of the economy. Contrary to the Afghan or Burmese cases, however (McCoy, 1999; Goodhand, 2009), Congo’s power brokers were not the militias or warlords themselves, but rather emerged from the “informal” trade networks that had historically controlled the relationship between the rural production centres and eastern Congo’s cities. In the Nande stronghold of Butembo, for example, a protection arrangement emerged between the local rebel administration, the Catholic Church and transnational businessmen that largely respected the “trinity” of state, religious institutions and economic interests which had historically ruled the area since colonial times. Just like during the immediate post-colonial era, this transposition of local regulatory authority did not lead to a regime shift per se, but rather con-

<sup>9</sup> An interesting article about the Walikale region has described this relationship as “negotiated peace for extortion” (Garret et al., 2009).

stituted a “pluralizing moment” (Connolly, 1996), in which “private” economic agents increasingly took over “public” administrative tasks. Similarly to what Janet Roitman (2005) describes in northern Cameroun, in the absence of strong state power, non-state agents (like transborder traders, smugglers and armed militiamen) increasingly became local regulatory authorities, who were involved in all sorts of governmental activities such as the administration of social services (like schools and development projects), the financing of infrastructure (like roads, airports and bridges), and the maintenance of local security. In hindsight, therefore, this local reconfiguration of power was not a simple reflection of the regional war economy or state-driven predation, but was actually based on a fundamental reinterpretation of local economic and political regulatory practice that followed changing conceptions of “that which is to be governed”, i.e. a series of regulatory measures and authorities over the access to services, rights and goods. As I hopefully made clear, the transposition of power from the state to non-state regulatory authorities in this Ugandan-Congolese border region did not follow an open struggle of “societies against the state” (Clastres, 1974), but rather involved a fundamental questioning of the intelligibility of fiscal and economic relationships as they had hitherto been exercised by the state. By questioning this legitimacy, however, non-state regulatory authorities like transnational traders, local militias and church leaders ultimately became legitimated as an alternative to state power, since they gradually replaced the historical form of “statist” political order that could no longer be assured. In the following section, I will try to draw some more general conclusions from these preliminary observations.

## **CONCLUSION: AFRICA’S GREAT TRANSFORMATION?**

In the previous section, I tried to make clear that “informal” economic activity such as intermediary and cross-border trade need not necessarily be limited to plain everyday survival but can in fact be powerfully accumulative, especially in connection with political processes like war and state privatization. A second argument developed in this paper is that the particular conditions generated by the borderland can have a critical impact on processes of state formation, because of its deep integration in regional political economies tied to particular systems of production. The point is that the Congolese-Ugandan borderland has never been an isolated periphery but rather forms part of a highly integrated regional political economy that maintains connections to both central state institutions and the global market economy. In particular, it has provided the cradle for a series of long-standing solidarities and political constellations between state and non-state organizations and institutions that transcends the purely local and even national scale. The originality of the borderland perspective lies exactly in its explanation of such non-linear processes of state formation, which by definition occur in “fits and starts” (Cramer and Goodhand, 2002) and are in constant flux and reconfiguration. This perspective has become particularly relevant in the analysis of political processes in Africa’s Great Lakes region where, in a context of armed conflict and protracted economic crisis, existing political and economic regimes have been fundamentally called into question (Jackson, 2006; Raeymaekers, 2009). An interesting aspect of this borderland perspective, therefore, is that it questions the idea that state-making necessarily involves the gradual diffusion of power

outwards, i.e. from the “centre” towards the “periphery”. As Jonathan Goodhand explains in his paper in this series (Goodhand, 2009), mainstream accounts are unable to offer insights into such challenging practices and power configurations because they ignore a set of boundary conditions and exchanges that essentially “make the centre what it is” (Scott, 2009: 16). Rather than seeking the ontological places of the “state”, “society”, “formal” or “informal” practices and regulations, the challenge of contemporary political science and ethnography is to demonstrate that political and personal forms of renewal and restructuring are not necessarily disconnected, but constantly take shape and are given meaning in people’s *own* ways of acknowledging and recognizing particular aspects of their lives (Greenhouse, 2002). This, along with a transboundary perspective, could form an interesting backbone for a future analysis of borderland-state relations.

One fundamental question that would need to be resolved in such comparative analysis is if the current “transboundary constellation” we observe in so many conflictual borderlands in Africa and elsewhere represent isolated and disconnected phenomena – the state of exception – or if they rather signal a more massive realignment of state-society relations in (post-)conflict settings tied to changing systems of production. Over the past years, several “governable spaces” have arisen in the Africa’s borderlands that are characterised by a “specific configuration of territory, identity, and rule” (Watts, 2004: 53). According to some, these reconfigurations constitute another decisive attack on the spatial perimeter of the state, as it recognises the “co-existence of multiple public authorities” linked with “multiple, partly overlapping, territories, established as places as meaning is attached to otherwise rather inert spatial widths” (Lund

2006: 694). Others maintain nonetheless that the state as such is not being challenged in such contemporary experiments, nor as public authority (albeit as one of many) nor as “image”, but that it gradually transforms as its power waxes and wanes (Arnaut and Hojbjerg, 2008). Whatever their outcome, these emergent orders show that the state in Africa remains always “a fluid and contextual entity whose shape and internal configurations of power are constantly changing” (Schatzberg, 1988: 142). What is regarded as “political”, therefore, may vary greatly, as outcomes of the interaction between state and non-state, “formal” and “informal” agencies and associations vary significantly over time and space.

As this paper argues, the borderland can potentially offer an original addition to this discussion by taking seriously both the transboundary and endogenous nature of state-making processes in protracted conflict settings in Africa and elsewhere (as the Afghan case seems to suggest, there remains an interesting scope for comparison between African and Asian cases in this respect). Through the constant mediation between everyday practices and institutions at the border with broader strategies of enclosure and state building, a gradual transformation of the political regime can possibly take place that is neither institutionally inert nor politically radical. Instead, it shows the constant flux of people and ideas between what is inertly categorized as the “state” and “society”, “formal” and “informal” and resistive and accommodating ways of structuring and survival. This does not mean that such interactions are completely conflict-less – on the contrary. In wartime Congo, the ongoing mediation between the various semi-autonomous subsystems of power in the eastern borderlands rather spurred a gradual dislocation of an existing political system without, however, leading to

a political “transition” of the kind proposed in current reconstruction efforts. Despite their rapid penetration by capitalist market forces, there occurred no substantial change in the existing mode of production on Congo’s countryside, which is still largely subsistence-based, characterized by unfree labour and externally dominated markets. In future analysis, this preoccupation with political change and reproduction will have to remain a fundamental part of researchers’ agendas.

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