

## Pilot field research in East Congo: Objectives & Methods

Analysis of the genealogy and the reproduction of violence calls for a methodological approach that is able to systematically combine social, cultural and political analysis, local history and a global perspective. In the absence of these interwoven elements, interpretations remain fragmented, leaving in the shadows key aspects such as culturally based strategy able to reduce the reproduction of conflict to its psychosocial consequences, and so on. Moreover, when a preliminary analysis of the economic, ethnographic and social horizon does not define the strategies of a proper interpretation, “violence”, “atrocities”, and the “barbarian” character of wars and people risk being the dominant categories of interpretation.

Till now, the dark and worrying specter of a continent, Africa, described as a place of nightmares, continues to be evoked overall in journalistic accounts concerning African as well as other wars<sup>1</sup>. The criticism of these stereotyped interpretations of African crises (crises is the plural of crisis) and conflicts has been the point of departure for our research in East Congo too. One of the most worrying consequences of the analysis and interventions that neglect historical and anthropological variables is, among others, of not being able to formulate effective strategies which adhere to the specificity of contexts, to the dramatic nature of events or to their enduring effects.

The expression “state of war”, introduced by Achille Mbembe<sup>2</sup>, is useful to describe the deep impact of a peculiar social logic of vendetta and counter-vendetta, suspicion and hate which reproduce during war time. As Mbembe suggests, «the state of war in contemporary Africa should be thought of as an institutionalized imagination (*imaginaire*), as a general cultural experience that fashions identities, along the same lines as the family, school, and other social systems». These observations perhaps illuminate one of the most complex aspects to keep in mind in order to implement peace building programs. The “state of war”, in fact, often becomes the premise for a *generalized right to exercise power to kill individually as much as collectively*. Young people are attracted by the possibilities offered by these strategies of *assertion of the self* and, in many cases, they participate voluntarily in the activities of war. Mass atrocities and wartime violence represent the central questions of our considerations. Moreover, we must remind ourselves that violence is part of a widespread *machinery of death* often assuming a “structural” character (Farmer, 2002).

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<sup>1</sup> An example is the work of Robert Kaplan: Kaplan, R. D., *The Coming Anarchy*, in «The Atlantic Monthly», Febbraio 1994, vol. 273, n. 2, pp. 44-76 (from web site: [www.theatlantic.com](http://www.theatlantic.com))

<sup>2</sup> Cfr. Mbembe, A., *African Modes of Self-Writing*, in «Public Culture», 2002, 14, 1, pp. 239-274.

**The methodology and the aims of the research consisted in:**

A) An interdisciplinary approach (anthropological, psychological, socio-economic) to understand new symbolic expressions of violence and the reasons for its genealogy.

B) A socio-anthropological analysis of the so-called “structural violence” and of inequalities, as well as the definition of strategies able to counteract them at local level; both these levels involved (and continue to involve in future research action) local actors as “researchers”. in order to contribute to promoting a new, wider comprehension of conflicts and of their possible solutions.

C) The promotion of *public negotiation* networks, and at the same time the identification and reinforcing of alternative sources of power and moral authority other than those mediated by violence and arms (traditional and religious leaders, churches, etc.).

D) Contributing to the re-establishing of reciprocal trust among groups and communities by recognition and support of appropriate strategies (meetings, public ceremonies of reconciliation including rituals of bereavement and land purification), as well as actions aimed at rebuilding village infrastructure and economic activity (supporting youth and women associations, etc.).

E) Identification and promotion of community health with specific regard to wartime-related traumas and to widespread infectious diseases in the area (TB, HIV-AIDS, etc.). In order to realize this aim, specific vulnerable groups will be targeted: among them, raped women, female heads of family, orphan children, elders;

F) The second part of the research will have among its outcomes the suggestion of recommendations in order to replicate this multifaceted research/action approach in other contexts (Sudan, Somalia, etc.).

Local researchers and scholars (coming from Butembo and Kinshasa University) as well as artists (painters, musicians, etc.), together with other actors of so-called “civilian society” we contacted during previous missions and meetings, will represent the key factor of the project second phase.

**The list below summarizes the most important themes we considered during our preliminary first field research phase:**

1. Analysis of the social changes related to war and violence, focusing on young people and families (violent attitudes, overthrow of age hierarchy, private violence etc.).
2. Analysis of ritualized and macabre forms of violence, focusing on terror used as an ordinary and widespread war strategy.
3. Identification and realization of psychosocial community- based strategies for the rehabilitation of the victims of violence, *coherent* with local needs and resources as well as with the cultural context (on “cultural competence” concept, see Eisenbruch et al. 2004)
4. Recollection of “traditional” forms of conflict reconciliation and evaluation of their effectiveness in the context of current conflicts.
5. Analysis of the different strategies of social reintegration<sup>3</sup> of ex-combatants, focusing on child-soldiers, and identification of the challenges affecting the social reintegration process.

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<sup>3</sup> A definition of these DDR programmes by McConnan and Uppard is as follows: Disarmament is the collection of small arms and light and heavy weapons within a conflict zone. It frequently entails the assembly and cantonment of combatants; it should also comprise the development of arms-management programmes, including safe storage and final disposition of arms, which may entail their destruction. Demobilisation refers to the process by which parties to a conflict begin to disband their military structures, and combatants begin the transformation into civilian life. It generally entails registration of former combatants; some kind of assistance to enable them to meet their immediate basic needs; discharge, and transportation to their home communities. [For adults] it may be followed by recruitment into a new, unified military force. Reintegration refers to the process which allows ex-combatants and their families to adapt economically and socially to productive civilian life. It generally entails the provision of a package of cash or in-kind compensation, training, and job-and income-generating projects.